

Google and others urge inventory of national airwaves

May 6 2009, By Elise Ackerman

In a rare show of unity over national communications policy, Google, the wireless industry and consumer advocates have come together to support a bill that would require the federal government to take a complete inventory of the national airwaves to determine what spectrum is being used, how it is being used and who is using it.

The government needs to clean up its sloppy record keeping, they say, or the United States risks running out of wireless capacity as people and businesses make increasing use of the mobile Internet.

"Radio spectrum is a natural resource, something that here in the U.S. is owned by all of us American citizens," Richard Whitt, Google's counsel for telecom and media, wrote in a blog post earlier this week in support of the [Radio Spectrum](#) Inventory Act, which was recently introduced in Congress by Sens. John Kerry, D-Mass., and Olivia Snowe, R-Maine.

"Most of us don't give it much thought -- and yet use of these airwaves is precisely what makes many of our modern communication systems possible."

Thanks in part to new devices like the iPhone that take the pain out of mobile browsing, the amount of data transmitted over wireless networks could double in three years, according to Nokia Siemens Networks.

"I don't expect current spectrum to be exhausted in the next couple of years, but I do suspect it will be highly stressed," said Peter Rysavy, an analyst who recently wrote a report on the demand for mobile broadband

spectrum for the CTIA, an international association for the wireless telecommunications industry.

Rysavy said new technologies will help, along with the construction of more [cell phone](#) towers, but that more spectrum will still be needed. Among the new technologies is WiMax, which provides a wireless data service similar in quality a high-speed cable connection, and femtocells, which are tiny wireless base stations that improve coverage in small areas.

Harold Feld, legal director for Public Knowledge, a public interest group based in Washington, said some spectrum could be freed up if the federal government was forced to use its airwaves more efficiently. "There is a lot of wasted spectrum that is under federal control," Feld said.

The new law, if passed, would require the Federal Communications Commission and the National Telecommunications & Information Administration to report on the use of all spectrum bands between 300 megahertz and 3.5 gigahertz, including information on the licenses or government user operating in each band and whether the spectrum is actually in use.

"There needs to be a very specific accounting not only of what spectrum is being used, but who is using it," said John Walls, a spokesman for CTIA.

The unusual alliance between [Google](#) and public interest groups and big telecommunications companies may be temporary. The telecom companies want to have the opportunity to buy a license to use any extra spectrum at an auction, as has traditionally been done.

Google, on the other hand, advocates the use of new technologies that

would allow the spectrum to be shared by whoever needs it.

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