

# FCC unveiling sweeping national broadband plan (Update)

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In this Oct. 2, 2007 file photo, A.J. Bowen of Schupp's Line Construction, Inc. works on fiber-optic installation in Norton, Vt. The Federal Communications Commission on Tuesday, March 16, 2010 will deliver to congress a sweeping proposal to overhaul U.S. broadband policy. (AP Photo/Toby Talbot, File)

(AP) -- More corners of the country would have high-speed Internet access and existing connections would become much faster under a sweeping proposal to overhaul U.S. broadband policy that is being unveiled Tuesday.

The plan from the Federal Communications Commission is meant to guide the government's strategy on broadband for the next decade and beyond. It reflects the Obama administration's concern that the nation that invented the Internet is in danger of falling behind the development of online applications in other countries that have faster broadband

speeds at lower prices.

Yet it's not certain the FCC can find the corporate support and legal clearance to carry out the entire plan.

Already, broadcasters oppose one key proposal, which calls for reclaiming some airwaves from TV stations and auctioning those frequencies to companies that deliver wireless Internet access. The FCC also wants to rewrite complicated telecommunications rules in order to pay for broadband using a federal program that now mainly subsidizes telephone service in poor and rural areas. Congress and federal regulators already have been trying to modernize that program for years.

Funding could be a question as well. The FCC does not estimate the total cost of the plan. It insists that its proposals could be paid for by auctioning off slices of the airwaves. But the agency will have to persuade Congress that as much as \$20 billion from the airwave auctions be set aside for broadband plans and not get routed to other purposes.

That would come on top of the \$7.2 billion for broadband included in the 2009 stimulus bill. The Commerce and Agriculture departments are handing out that money now.

Last year's stimulus bill also required the FCC to come up with the broadband plan, which is being delivered to Congress on Tuesday. The plan argues that high-speed Internet access is no longer just a luxury but is critical for economic development, education, health care and other aspects of daily life.

"Broadband is an infrastructure challenge that's very akin to what we've faced in the past with telephones and electricity," FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski said in an interview. Genachowski has made the broadband plan his top priority, and his legacy at the commission will be

linked to the plan's success or failure.

The proposal sets a goal of connecting 100 million U.S. households to broadband connections of 100 megabits per second - at least 20 times faster than most home connections now - by 2020. Although existing connections are often fast enough to let people watch TV shows or movies on computers, faster connections would open new kinds of services, such as fast-loading, high-definition videos ideal for viewing on big-screen TVs. The FCC also says faster broadband would enable doctors to monitor patients over the Internet and broaden the opportunities for students to take classes online.

The plan also calls for every American community to have at least one "anchor" institution, such as a school, library or hospital, that has ultra-high-speed Internet access. The FCC defines that as at least a gigabit per second, 10 times faster than the 100 megabits per second envisioned for home connections.

In addition, the plan is designed to encourage more people to subscribe to broadband.

About two-thirds of U.S. households have high-speed Internet access now. Many people in the remaining one-third could get broadband but choose not to because they think it's too expensive or because they don't see a need for it. The FCC plan calls for increasing adoption rates to more than 90 percent of the population. One proposal calls for a Digital Literacy Corps to teach people how to use the Internet.

When rural areas lack broadband access, it's often because phone and cable companies haven't found it worthwhile to invest in dragging high-speed lines to remote places that would have few subscribers. One way the FCC hopes to expand broadband use is with wireless technology.

The wireless industry currently licenses about 500 megahertz of the wireless spectrum. In a move akin to adding more lanes to a freeway, the FCC hopes to free up 500 megahertz more over the next decade, both for licensed purposes and for uses that don't require a license, such as Wi-Fi networks. The agency hopes to get roughly 120 megahertz of that spectrum from broadcasters of free, over-the-air TV. It would allow broadcasters to unload frequencies they don't need and share in the proceeds raised by auctioning those airwaves to wireless companies.

That proposal has run into fierce resistance from the National Association of Broadcasters. TV broadcasters already gave up more than 100 megahertz of spectrum when they shut off analog signals last year and began broadcasting only in digital. Many say they plan to use their remaining frequencies to transmit high-definition signals, to "multicast" multiple channels and to deliver mobile TV to phones, laptops and cars.

In a statement Monday, the National Association of Broadcasters said it is also concerned that some aspects of the plan "may in fact not be as voluntary as originally promised."

The FCC plan also lays out a framework for overhauling the federal Universal Service Fund to pay for expanding broadband instead of basic telephone service. The \$8-billion-a-year program, financed by a surcharge that businesses and consumers pay on long-distance bills, was established to subsidize telephone service in sparsely populated places.

Tapping this pool of money for broadband could be an uphill push, too, because the long-distance revenue base that supports the Universal Service Fund is shrinking. The FCC plan offers several options to pay for the new broadband programs, including one that would require no additional money from Congress and one that would accelerate the construction of broadband networks if Congress approves a one-time injection of several billion dollars.

The FCC may also need to sort out questions of legal authority. Existing law and policies say Universal Service money can only be used for telephone service, not broadband.

The plan also recommends that Congress spend up to \$16 billion over 10 years to build and operate for a nationwide wireless broadband network that would allow police officers, firefighters and other emergency workers to communicate with each other.

Early reactions from the big phone and cable companies that dominate the U.S. broadband market were positive. US Telecom, a trade group that represents phone companies, praised the FCC for recognizing that "it will be through private sector investment and innovation that America's broadband deployment goals will be met."

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