

New law could free up TV airwaves for mobile use

February 28 2012, By ANICK JESDANUN , AP Technology Writer

A new law could result in fewer TV stations on the air, in exchange for faster wireless data services for smartphones and tablet computers.

Before you rush out to download "Bad Teacher" from [iTunes](#), though, keep in mind that several things need to happen over the next few years before people start seeing faster wireless speeds.

The law, part of a [payroll tax](#) package signed by President [Barack Obama](#) last week, gives the [Federal Communications Commission](#) authority to explore such an exchange. The [FCC](#) will have to write the rules for it in the coming months.

The idea is to squeeze over-the-air television, which has few viewers, into a smaller slice of the airwaves. Anything freed would be available for bidding by companies, including [wireless carriers](#) such as AT&T Inc. and Verizon Wireless.

Broadcasters will need to decide whether they want to give up their frequencies. Those that do could continue to operate as cable-only channels if they don't want to go out of business. Bidding for freed airwaves likely won't begin until late 2013 or early 2014, partly to give bidders time to raise money to pay for any spectrum they win.

Although vast swaths of broadcast spectrum were freed when television signals converted from analog to digital in 2009, much of that has already been claimed. Technology companies have been clamoring for

even more airwaves to satisfy growing consumer appetite for movies, books and websites on mobile devices.

About 11 million households lack cable or satellite service and get TV signals only over the air, according to Nielsen. That compares with 89 million who are cable or satellite subscribers.

There are more than 330 million devices active on cellular networks, which could benefit from the transfer of the spectrum.

The FCC envisions freeing up 500 megahertz of spectrum over the next 10 years. As much as a quarter of that could come from television.

The National Association of Broadcasters isn't sure how many stations would go along, and it's watching to make sure no broadcaster will be forced to participate. Some might have to move to a different frequency, such as from Channel 49 to Channel 19, but they would be compensated to build new towers and make other adjustments. Viewers using antennas would have to find the station's new home.

Television stations once had Channels 2 to 83, except for 37, which is used for astronomy. Channels 70 to 83, mostly used to retransmit signals from other channels, disappeared in the 1980s and have been reassigned to other uses. Stations gave up Channels 52 to 69 in 2009 as part of a transition to digital broadcasts, and much of that has already been reassigned. Depending on how many stations want to participate, Channels 31 to 51, excluding 37, could be freed up.

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