

Govt IDs more airwaves for commercial wireless

March 27 2012, By ANICK JESDANUN , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- The federal government wants to alleviate data congestion on smartphones and other mobile devices by asking the Defense Department, NASA and other agencies to switch to new locations on the airwaves or share their existing frequencies with commercial networks.

The Commerce Department said Tuesday that it has identified a 95 megahertz-wide band that could be auctioned to wireless companies. That's enough to support at least two new national wireless data networks. The block is particularly desirable because it is near frequencies already available to cellphone companies.

Freeing up the airwaves won't be easy, however. The military uses parts of that block for training and missile-guidance systems. Law enforcement agencies need it for video surveillance. NASA and the Pentagon operate unmanned aircraft there.

The government estimates that there are more than 20 federal agencies with roughly 3,100 individual frequency assignments in the 1755-1850 MHz band. The government will have to find new homes for them and could spend as much as \$18 billion over 10 years moving current users to new locations.

Commerce officials hope to reduce costs and speed up the transition by brokering sharing arrangements. The government will seek to recover the costs by auctioning that spectrum to companies. In a 2008 auction, the Federal Communications Commission sold the right to use about 54

megahertz of spectrum to various buyers, chiefly AT&T Inc. and Verizon Wireless, for \$19.6 billion.

The latest effort stems from the Obama administration's call in June 2010 to nearly double the space available for commercial wireless carriers. The wireless industry currently holds roughly 500 megahertz of spectrum, but hasn't put all of it to use yet. President Barack Obama challenged the federal government to free up another 500 megahertz.

Wireless and technology companies are clamoring for more spectrum to meet growing demand for movies, games and other data-intensive activities on mobile devices. But, at the same time, federal agencies have become more reliant on their frequencies as they send more unmanned vehicles, for instance, to support border-control and disaster-relief efforts.

The Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration spent the past several months working with federal agencies to determine how they currently use their designated blocks and to consider appropriate areas for relocation. It now plans to bring in industry representatives to discuss ways they could use the block even if some agencies don't relocate.

Officials noted that some of the agencies don't use their frequencies nationwide or 24 hours a day, allowing wireless companies to potentially offer commercial services during the downtime. They say the technology behind the newer 4G LTE data networks offers ways for multiple users to co-exist.

Commerce officials declined to say how long the discussions might take and when they would be able to recommend changes to the FCC.

The wireless industry's trade group, CTIA, said it recognized that sharing

may be necessary, but that should be the exception.

"We need to be able to bring spectrum to market that is viable and usable," said Chris Guttman-McCabe, CTIA's vice president for regulatory affairs. "We want the balance to tilt heavily toward clearing the spectrum."

Guttman-McCabe also said the government should prioritize freeing a smaller block, at 1755-1780 MHz, that is most valued by the industry, rather than wait until the entire band could be cleared.

The Commerce Department earlier identified 115 megahertz of spectrum that could be freed over five years. Of that, 100 megahertz would be shared with Defense Department radar systems. Another 15 megahertz would be reclaimed from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration satellites used to disseminate weather information.

If Commerce is able to free up the 95 megahertz-wide band identified Tuesday, the federal government would be 40 percent toward meeting Obama's goals.

Other areas targeted include frequencies now used for television broadcasts. A new law allows the FCC to essentially pay some broadcasters to voluntarily go off the air by sharing any auction proceeds with them.

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Citation: Govt IDs more airwaves for commercial wireless (2012, March 27) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-03-govt-airwaves-wireless.html>

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