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'Real Problems' Loom

FCC Must Take Closer Look at Receiver Standards, Hatfield Says

Receiver performance standards will become an increasingly significant issue as the FCC looks at how to make more efficient use of the spectrum, unless industry steps forward to make receivers work better, former FCC and NTIA official Dale Hatfield said Tuesday at the Catholic University of America's communications symposium. Office of Engineering and Technology Chief Julius Knapp said the FCC continues to look closely at questions about receiver performance.

"If we don't do a better job on receivers going forward we've got real problems," said Hatfield, former acting NTIA administrator and chief engineer at the FCC. "We need to figure out, even if it's voluntary, some way to stop receivers out there from consuming" so much spectrum.

The FCC examined receiver standards in a notice of inquiry launched in March of 2003, which asked whether the agency should encourage or mandate receiver performance requirements. That proceeding, recommended by the FCC's Spectrum Policy Task Force, was later formally terminated by the commission "without prejudice."

As the FCC considers making more spectrum available for wireless broadband "you have to look at all of the elements," Knapp said. "Certainly, you don't want to convey that we're eager to regulate. ... As we go forward, trying to squeeze more and more out of the spectrum, it's an issue that we have to address."

Knapp told us the FCC's Technology Advisory Council will look more closely at the issue. "I don't know what the next steps might be," he said. "It's something that we have to consider as we're trying to get more access to the spectrum." Regulators can't focus just on whether a band is being used but need to ask what would be the impact of putting new services in a band, he said: "To do that you have to consider the receiver characteristics in the adjacent bands."

Hatfield said isolating interference is getting more difficult. "The digital signals tend to be more noise-like," he said. "They accumulate. When the interferer is operating at higher power they sort of pop up and you can find them, you can have a thousand devices out there each causing a small amount of interference." That can be the spectrum equivalent of "death by a thousand cuts," he said.

"There's been questions about the commission's jurisdiction on receivers so that's sort of a threshold issue," Hatfield said in an interview. "To me, there's a time for things" and the FCC's LightSquared proceeding on GPS interference protection is making receiver questions more relevant, he said. "Part of the question is what is the quality of receivers used in GPS," he said. — **Howard Buskirk**