

Spectrum Requirements for Public Safety Interoperable Communications (Draft)

I. Introduction

Federal and non-Federal public safety first responders communicate over wireless networks that operate in a number of different radio frequency bands and can employ different technical standards. When multiple agencies are required to respond to a major incident, this lack of standardization will impede interoperability between agencies that use different wireless technologies.

Although the Panel learned that the primary communications problem affecting the response to Hurricane Katrina was *operability*, due to the relevant public safety networks being rendered non-functional for at least some period of time, it also received testimony that indicated that the lack of effective interoperability disrupted the response. In particular, the number of frequencies available for mutual aid communications were insufficient to accommodate all requirements.

First responder interoperability is a complex problem that the Congress, FCC and other Federal Agencies have worked on for decades. Since 1996, spectrum in the 700 MHz band has been identified as the primary resource for future public safety communications systems with improved interoperability capabilities. However, that spectrum is not now available on a nationwide basis due to the continued operation of incumbent television broadcast stations. Also, in those areas where this spectrum could be utilized today, public safety agencies have a lack of funding. Recent legislation has been passed that ensures the availability of this spectrum for nationwide public safety use by February, 2009. This same legislation also earmarks \$1 billion in Federal funds for the purchase of equipment to foster interoperability with 700 MHz public safety systems.

While this Panel has neither the time nor the expertise to address all aspects of this issue, it urges the FCC to continue promoting the development and availability of the 700 MHz spectrum so that interoperable public safety communications systems can be deployed as quickly as possible.

II. Recommendations

1. Consistent with recent legislation, the FCC must maintain the schedule for commencing commercial spectrum auctions before January 28, 2008 to fully fund the \$1 billion public safety interoperability program.
2. The FCC should work with NTIA to establish appropriate criteria for the distribution of \$1 billion in a manner that best promotes interoperability with the 700 MHz band.
3. The FCC should encourage the expeditious development and approval of regional plans for the use of 700 MHz systems.
4. The FCC should expeditiously approve any requests by broadcasters to terminate analog service in the 700 MHz band before the end of the digital television transition in 2009 in order to allow public safety users immediate access to this spectrum.