

Advisory for Analog Cable Television Subscribers

This advisory applies to customers of cable television systems that carry both analog and digital channels (called “hybrid” systems). If you subscribe to a hybrid cable system and you watch programming without a cable set-top box or other equipment (that is, you plug the cable feed directly into your TV set), then your cable television service may be affected by a recent FCC rule change. Subscribers to “all analog” or “all digital” cable systems are not affected by this rule change.

Effective December 12, 2012, a hybrid cable system operator may choose to carry some or all local broadcast stations only in digital format (instead of carrying these stations in both a digital and an analog format). This is a business decision made by your cable company and is not required by the federal government. If your cable operator decides to carry certain local broadcast stations only in digital format, FCC rules require that it offer you the necessary equipment (for example, a set-top box, digital transport adaptor (DTA), or a CableCARD) either for free or at an affordable cost. Cable operators must also provide at least 30 days’ notice to subscribers and local broadcast stations before carrying a broadcast station only in digital format.

Why did the FCC change this rule?

The FCC recently determined that changes in the television marketplace and technology should permit cable operators more flexibility in meeting their legal obligation to ensure that all broadcast stations are “viewable” to subscribers. Industry statistics show that cable subscribers are rapidly switching to digital service. In addition, cable operators are now making small digital set-top boxes available at low cost (or no cost) to analog customers. Giving cable operators more flexibility regarding the use of their limited capacity will allow them to tailor their offerings more closely to the needs of their subscribers. Operators that transition some or all channels to digital will have more capacity to offer improved services, such as greater broadband speeds and wider HD offerings, to the growing number of cable subscribers receiving digital service. Under the FCC’s rules, it is up to the individual cable operator to choose whether to continue to carry some or all local broadcast stations in analog format.

Who will be affected by this change?

Subscribers to hybrid cable systems who currently watch television without a set-top box or other equipment (that is, they plug the cable feed directly into a TV set) will be affected by this change. This includes, for example, subscribers watching television with an analog TV set or with a digital TV set that does not have a quadrature amplitude modulation (QAM) tuner. Most digital TV sets, however, have a QAM tuner that will allow subscribers to watch digital cable channels without a set-top box.

What does this mean for cable subscribers?

If you are a subscriber to a hybrid cable system, you should be aware:

- If your cable operator chooses to continue carrying all broadcast stations in both digital and analog format, your television service will not be affected by this recent FCC rule change.

- If your cable operator chooses to stop carrying some or all broadcast stations in analog format, you may need a set-top box, DTA or CableCARD to continue viewing these stations on analog TV sets.
- Your cable operator must provide you with advance notice about any change in analog cable service and must offer you a set-top box, DTA or CableCARD at low or no cost.
- Many consumers with newer TV sets (digital TV sets with a QAM tuner) can watch digital cable channels without a set-top box. Try scanning for channels. [See FCC Consumer Guide about Rescanning for Digital TV Channels: www.fcc.gov/guides/rescan-digital-tv-channels.] If scanning does not work, you will need a set-top box.

Consumer Help Center

For more information on consumer issues, visit the FCC's Consumer Help Center at www.fcc.gov/consumers.

Alternate formats

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