

Narrowbanding deadline looms large

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With just 19 days until the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) narrowbanding deadline, approximately **30-35 percent of all affected licenses** will not be compliant with the requirements, according to a variety of sources. While the FCC does not offer a complete list of the localities and agencies that have submitted requests for an extension/waiver, a quick search of the **FCC Commission documents page** yields numerous requests, and this doesn't account for the agencies that have yet to file paperwork for a waiver. Once the deadline passes, the FCC will have a better idea of how many agencies are not in compliance.

As a quick refresher, the FCC announced that all non-federal radio licenses operating 25kHz systems in the 150-174 MHz and 412-512 MHz (VHF and UHF) spectrums must migrate to more efficient 12.5 kHz (narrowband) channels by January 1, 2013. The order from the FCC came in December 2004, giving agencies eight years to comply. According to the FCC, agencies that do not narrowband will face "enforcement action, including admonishments, monetary forfeitures and/or license revocation." It is unclear what the monetary fines will amount to, but the FCC may take non-compliant systems off the air or assess fines after the deadline. The FCC will begin reframing the new 12.5 kHz channels created from the narrowbanding, which could cause interference with wideband channels still being utilized by public safety agencies.

Looking at the measures the FCC will apparently take should agencies not move off the wideband frequencies makes you wonder: Would the FCC really take these systems off the air? Would the FCC risk an agency's ability to respond to incidents because it is no longer online using these channels? Eventually, these older channels will be reassigned for other uses, and public safety officials will then be crossing lines. So, maybe the FCC will act on this statement. It is indeterminate as to what will eventually occur on January 1, but this much is clear: There are going to be violators.

As mentioned, a number of agencies have made requests for a narrowbanding waiver to push off compliance for various reasons. The Spokane Regional Emergency Communications System in Washington state requested, and was **granted a waiver** through June 30, 2014. The state of Montana was also **granted a waiver**, as it was determined by the FCC that it was in the best interest of the state's citizens.

Analyst's Take

The reasons for agency waivers are numerous, but in many cases, agencies have been engaged in various upgrades and require more time to complete them. Agencies granted waivers have to show an effort to move forward with a new system, and a time frame for doing so. According a narrowbanding guide from the Department of Homeland Security in March 2011, equipment manufactured after 1997 can be reprogrammed for narrowbanding. Vendors should work with agencies to reprogram existing equipment and infrastructure should the agency not have available funds to purchase a new system. In other cases, existing manufacturers or in-house radio technicians can reprogram radios to save money. Agencies and vendors need to work together to learn all the different options.

In some cases, agencies are working with equipment that is decades old and requires complete replacement to be compliant. These agencies may lack funding to move forward and may not have completed a waiver request in time. Vendors can assist these agencies in completing these requests to avoid FCC fines. If the waiver period is too late, an open line of communication should still be developed with the FCC in order to ensure a successful transition.