



TELECOMMUNICATIONS

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Will Reduced Wireless Backhaul Costs Promote Broadband?

The FCC recently proposed to remove regulatory barriers to the use of microwave spectrum for wireless backhaul in order to increase deployment of mobile broadband networks. Consistent with the FCC's National Broadband Plan, the FCC is exploring ways to increase the flexibility, capacity, and cost-effectiveness of the microwave bands located below 13 GHz, while protecting incumbent licensees in these bands.

What is wireless backhaul, and why is it important? Wireless backhaul uses wireless communications systems, typically microwave or satellites, to get data from an end user to a major network, or the transmission of network data over an alternative wireless route. Backhaul costs are a significant mobile wireless operator's network operating expense, and the demand for backhaul capacity is increasing. By enabling more flexible, cost-effective, and high-capacity microwave services, the FCC proposes to increase deployment of fourth-generation (4G) mobile broadband networks across America.

The FCC's Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) seeks to update regulatory classifications, and to provide for increased spectrum sharing to be made available for broadband backhaul or other advanced point-to-point uses, by

- permitting greater spectrum sharing;
- permitting Adaptive Modulation, which would allow temporary operations below the minimum capacity under certain circumstances to maintain critical communications; and
- permitting "Auxiliary" Fixed Stations, which may permit more efficient use of spectrum at a substantially reduced cost.

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The FCC's Notice of Inquiry (NOI) seeks comments on other technical and policy changes, including:

- modifying or lowering efficiency standards in rural to reduce backhaul costs;
- reviewing antenna standards, and possibly allowing smaller antennas or greater use of fixed service facilities; and
- general review of the FCC's rules to promote flexible, efficient and cost-effective provisions of wireless backhaul service.

In essence, the FCC is considering updating its rules as broadcasters and other microwave users move to digital-based systems. This impacts entities that use and produce wireless backhaul facilities, including broadcasters, microwave equipment manufacturers, satellite services, and tower operators as well as entities that carry the wireless backhaul traffic, including wireless carriers. While critics may oppose relaxing efficiency standards in rural areas, does it make sense to do so if it will ultimately reduce backhaul costs and thereby promote broadband deployment? Will it help, or diminish the availability of scarce backhaul spectrum? How will these proposals impact WiFi, WiMAX and other broadband technologies? Most important, will these proposals promote fourth generation (4G) mobile broadband network deployment by reducing the cost of broadband backhaul solutions?

Comments and reply comments (in WT Docket No. 10-153) are due 60 and 90 days, respectively, after publication of the item in the Federal Register.

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