

Subscribers to analog cable TV get reprieve from FCC till 2012

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WASHINGTON — The Federal Communications Commission approved rules Tuesday night that it says will ensure that millions of cable subscribers will still be able to watch broadcast programming after the digital-television transition in 2009.

The FCC says 40 million households are analog-only subscribers. Tuesday's ruling will require cable operators to guarantee analog-cable customers will receive broadcast channels until February 2012.

While the greatest impact of the transition will be on viewers of nondigital televisions who receive their signals over the air, nondigital-cable subscribers have also been a concern to the commission.

Beginning Feb. 18, 2009, broadcasters will stop sending analog signals to over-the-air customers and to cable companies. Over-the-air customers will have to buy a converter.

As for the nation's analog-cable subscribers, cable operators must convert the digital signal to analog at the point where the cable signal originates or supply customers

with a "down converter" that will change digital signals to analog at the TV set. The cable industry has pledged to do this voluntarily. The new FCC rules make it mandatory.

The FCC will also allow for certain smaller cable systems to request a waiver.

In other action, the agency voted to force cell-phone companies to employ a stricter geographic standard when testing the ability of rescue workers to locate callers in distress.

People who call 911 from a wired telephone can be traced to specific addresses. That's not the case with cell phones.

Carriers are required to test their location systems and be able to pinpoint callers within certain distances. But they have been allowed to test their equipment over their entire national service areas, meaning good results in one region may skew the average.

The Association of Public Safety Communications Officials International has lobbied the agency to force carriers to measure location accuracy at the community level or "public-safety answering point" level.