LightSquared Pushes FCC on GPS Standards

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LightSquared is pushing the FCC to force GPS manufacturers to comply with proposed standards that would make receivers less vulnerable to interference from signals in neighboring bands.

LightSquared has been blocked from launching its network after tests showed that transmissions from its base stations affected GPS receivers, especially sensitive high-precision devices used by the military and aviation industries.

The company blames the GPS industry for the problem, claiming manufacturers continued to make receivers that “eavesdropped” on its spectrum years after it gained approval to operate in its band. The GPS industry says the issue is of LightSquared’s own making.

“Currently, the vast majority of receivers operate without any real reinforceable certification or other standards,” LightSquared regulatory affairs executive Jeff Carlisle said in a call with reporters. “These receivers look well outside GPS frequencies into our spectrum and into other providers’ spectrum.”

The company’s Tuesday recommendation to the agency could create a long-term fix for the issue by phasing out receivers susceptible to its signals, but won’t do much to help it in the short term as it fights to gain approval for its planned wholesale LTE network.

Unless the regulations are made retroactive, they won’t address problematic receivers already on the market. The FCC says it will not green-light LightSquared’s project until the company can show it won’t affect GPS.

The proposed standards focus on commercial GPS receivers operating in the 1559-1610 MHz band, which is set aside for global navigation satellite systems. The rules would ban domestic manufacturers from making GPS chips that pick up on signals from neighboring bands and mandate that all receivers sold in the United States also meet the requirement.

The recommendations also would allow companies holding spectrum in adjacent bands - like LightSquared - to "fully enjoy the benefits of their licenses."

Carlisle denied that the proposal was a roundabout way to open up a chunk of spectrum it abandoned last summer for being too close to GPS bands.

“It doesn’t go to whether the upper 10 MHz can be used or not,” he said. “We’re not looking for some backdoor way of making that spectrum available.”

The Coalition to Save Our GPS, a vocal opponent of LightSquared's network, came

out swinging against the proposal, calling it "self-serving nonsense."

"The FCC reaffirmed as recently as March 2010 that LightSquared was only authorized to provide limited terrestrial services to fill in the gaps in its satellite coverage," coalition founder and Trimble executive Jim Kirkland said in a statement. "LightSquared's filing completely ignores the clear regulatory record on this point, and its suggestion that GPS manufacturers should have designed receivers to accommodate a prohibited use is simply self-serving nonsense."

The FCC did not reply to requests for comment.

The agency currently has few regulations on receivers, since they don't emit signals that could threaten other networks. However, it does have requirements in place for differential GPS receivers and has licensing requirements for equipment that picks up signals from foreign satellites.

This isn't the first time LightSquared has pushed the FCC to re-examine the way it regulates GPS receivers in light of the controversy over its plans.

In December, the company asked the FCC to rule that commercial GPS receivers are "not entitled to any interference protection whatsoever," making manufacturers liable for problems resulting from LightSquared's operations.

The FCC agreed late last month to open up the proposal for public comment.
[1] The first round of comments is due Feb. 27, with follow-up statements due March 13.

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