FCC, Carriers Finally Agree on Lower 700MHz Solution

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Wireless customers in rural areas have reason to rejoice, as the FCC reports that operators in the United States have finally reached a voluntary industry solution to resolve the lack of interoperability in the lower 700 MHz band.

Acting FCC Chairwoman Mignon Clyburn released a statement saying that the agreement will spur private investment, job creation, and the development of innovative new services and devices.

“This is a big win for consumers, especially in rural areas, who will see more competition and more choices," Cyburn wrote.

The fate of the lower 700MHz bands has long been a point of contention between AT&T and the smaller rural carriers. The main point of contention is that many of the smaller carriers have been unable to find comaptible LTE equipment and handsets because band 12 lacks the scale of AT&T's established band 17. Today's solution could also make it easier for smaller carriers to provide their customers with LTE roaming.

AT&T has long argued that the change would open its customers to "substantial" interference problems from the A block, which lacks a guard band between broadcast television transmissions in adjacent Channel 51.

At one point, AT&T said that if the FCC put its proposed interoperability mandate into effect, AT&T would have to abandon its development of band 17 LTE devices, overhaul its device design plans and reconfigure its network to add in support for band 12.

Regional providers including U.S. Cellular and C Spire Wireless, both owners of band 12 licensees, cried foul, sayin that AT&T was exaggerating interference issues to maintain its unique band class, which would have banned its smaller competitors from benefitting from its LTE ecosystem.

C Spire went so far as to sue AT&T, Motorola Mobility and Qualcomm over the interoperability issue. C Spire said the companies had colluded to manipulate the standards-setting process and delay development of equipment and devices for band 12. The Mississippi-based provider has been unable to use the band 12

spectrum it paid $191.5 million for at the FCC's 2008 auction because it can't procure compatible smartphones. The LTE network it plans to launch in September will instead run on its AWS and PCS holdings, a strategy that gives it less headroom to handle customers' data demands.

Joan Marsh, AT&T's Vice President of federal regulatory, announced via a blog post that AT&T has agreed to take definitive and concrete steps to bring interoperability to the lower 700 MHz band. Marsh said the plan that was agreed to will resolve interference issues relating to the use of the 700 MHz A Block.

“AT&T, for its part, has committed to investing considerable time and resources to the modification of its 700 MHz LTE network through the implementation of a newly-standardized software feature," Marsh explained. The feature will allow AT&T’s network to support Band 12 capable devices, and AT&T has also committed to working collaboratively with its chipset partners and OEMs to introduce, within a reasonable time frame, new Band 12 capable devices into its device portfolio.

“These commitments, along with actions the FCC intends to take to harmonize the service rules for the 700 MHz E Block to address interference concerns, will put the industry on a path to increased investment and deployment opportunities in the 700 MHz A Block," Marsh wrote.

In a letter to the FCC, AT&T said that because it does not own any lower 700 MHz A block licenses, it couldn't commit to testing any new Band 12 capable devices on an A block network. AT&T instead anticipates field testing new Band 12 capable devices using an MFBI network operating on AT&T’s lower 700 MHz B and C block spectrum.

The carrier also said it reserves the right to plan and manage lower 700 MHz interoperability support in a manner that will not disrupt existing services, strand existing devices or result in unnecessary cost or delay.

Steve Berry, president and CEO Of the Competitive Carriers Association, applauded Clyburn for her leadership on the matter, saying that the solution will allow lower A block licensees like U.S. Cellular and C Spire Wireless to finally use all of their lower 700 MHz spectrum.

"In turn, every consumer, especially rural and disadvantaged consumers who lack access to high speed broadband, will benefit from her efforts,” Berry said in a statement.

Berry said it was fitting that on the eve of the anniversary of 911, "public safety will have the surety that they can leverage the many carriers deploying in the lower

700 MHz A block, creating competition for devices and services and lower costs."

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