

Platforms

DTAs Are Cleared for Takeoff

FCC Grants Waivers to Devices From Four Vendors

by TODD SPANGLER

IN A WIN FOR CABLE OPERATORS AND their technology suppliers, the Federal Communications Commission has approved the use of low-cost, limited-function digital set-tops with integrated security from Motorola, Cisco Systems, Pace and Thomson.

The sub-\$50 devices — known as digital transport adapters, or DTAs — could accelerate cable systems' move to all-digital operation, thereby freeing up large tracts of spectrum currently used for analog video.

The agency's Media Bureau, in an order adopted and released Aug. 24, said operators may use the vendors' DTAs with embedded conditional access in a three-year exemption to the FCC rule prohibiting the use of set-tops with integrated security functions.

The ruling comes after the FCC in late May granted Evolution Broadband a waiver for two limited-function DTAs. In that order, the agency said it would consider requests for similar devices from competing vendors, leading Motorola, Cisco Systems, Pace and Thomson to submit their waiver petitions in June.

DTAs provide one-way access to digital cable programming and convert it into analog format. To qualify for a waiver, they lack advanced functions, such as digital video recording.

The FCC concluded that such devices "will serve the public interest by furthering cable operators' migrations to all-digital networks ... and would not jeopardize the develop-

ment of the competitive marketplace for navigation devices" from consumer-electronics companies, the Media Bureau said in the ruling.

Comcast, for one, has been widely deploying DTAs this year in an initiative code-named Project Cavalry to free up analog spectrum in cable systems across much of its footprint. But so far, the MSO has been using Motorola, Pace and Thomson devices that do not have security functions enabled.

The American Cable Association applauded the ruling. "The ACA is pleased that the FCC is adopting policies that will allow small, independent cable providers to deploy low-cost digital set-top boxes to their customers," said ACA CEO Matt Polka in a statement.

Six public-interest groups, led by Public Knowledge, had opposed the DTA vendors' waiver requests, expressing concern that the devices under consideration "may well have the capability (after a simple software download) to provide more than 'one-way, non-HD, non-DVR services.'"

In response, the Media Bureau clarified in its order that any modification that would enhance the features of the DTAs would "effectively make the subject boxes different devices" and would thus require separate waivers.

"We are disappointed that the Media Bureau granted the waivers for low-end set-top boxes, which lock in advantages the cable

companies already have while offering consumers set-top boxes with fewer features than they might otherwise get in an open market," said Public Knowledge president Gigi Sohn.

Among those backing the vendors' DTA waiver requests was The Walt Disney Co., which said DTAs "provide a public benefit by affording a means for all subscribers to cable services to enjoy the improved resolution and greater variety of digital programming networks being made available today by programmers like Disney."

The FCC's integrated set-top ban requires cable operators to use CableCards in leased equipment that provides advanced video services.

Separately last month, CableLabs qualified a multistream CableCard developed by Evolution Digital, a supplier of digital cable set-top boxes and systems, and conditional-access vendor Conax, a subsidiary of Norwegian telecommunications operator Telenor.

The newly qualified card, which meets OpenCable CableCard Interface 2.0 specifications, is interoperable with any CableCard-enabled device certified by CableLabs.

In addition, Evolution has filed another waiver request with the FCC for its sub-\$100 HD-capable DTA, arguing that high-definition programming does not amount to an advanced service that would be subject to the integrated set-top ban. ■



Evolution Broadband's CableCard

John Eggerton contributed to this report.