



Highlights of [GAO-08-191T](#), a testimony before the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet

Why GAO Did This Study

On February 17, 2009, federal law requires all full-power television stations in the United States to cease analog broadcasting, enabling the government to reclaim valuable spectrum that the broadcasters currently use for analog broadcasts. This change, often referred to as the digital television (DTV) transition, requires action by broadcasters and consumers to ensure broadcast television signals are still available and viewable. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) created a program to subsidize consumers' purchases of digital-to-analog converter boxes. This testimony provides preliminary information on (1) the progress made by federal entities, and others, to facilitate the transition, (2) the progress in the education of consumers about the transition, (3) the progress made in implementing the converter box subsidy program, (4) technical issues of the transition, and (5) future GAO work on the progress of the DTV transition. GAO interviewed officials with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and NTIA. Further, GAO interviewed a wide variety of industry and other stakeholders involved with the transition, including members of the DTV Transition Coalition—a group of public and private stakeholders, and experts on strategic communications. GAO discussed this testimony with FCC and NTIA officials and incorporated their comments.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-191T](#). For more information, contact Mark L. Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

DIGITAL TELEVISION TRANSITION

Preliminary Information on Progress of the DTV Transition

What GAO Found

FCC and NTIA, in conjunction with other stakeholders, have taken steps to facilitate the DTV transition. For example, FCC has conducted periodic reviews to report on transition progress, and NTIA has issued a contract for administering the converter box subsidy program. In addition, private sector industries have also begun preparing for the transition. Despite public-private sector interaction designed to help facilitate the transition, we found that no comprehensive plan exists for the DTV transition. Without such a plan, meaningful guidance for coordinating responsibilities and measuring progress might not be available to the private or public sector.

Several federal and private stakeholders have begun consumer education campaigns. FCC and NTIA have developed informational materials and begun direct outreach to consumer groups. In addition, private industry stakeholders created the DTV Transition Coalition and are voluntarily conducting outreach efforts. However, these efforts are in the planning stages and challenges remain. An expert panel that GAO convened identified potential challenges and key practices for a consumer education campaign.

NTIA has made progress in implementing the converter box subsidy program, but the program's outcome depends on the voluntary participation of retailers and manufacturers. Retailers we contacted expressed concerns about the possibility of a redemption system that would affect their point-of-sale systems and stated they would need more information on IBM's technical solution before they could assess the impact on their systems and whether it would affect their participation. With limited or delayed retailer participation, consumers might face difficulties in redeeming their coupons for eligible converter boxes.

Most television stations already transmit a digital signal, but technical and coordination issues, such as antenna replacement and tower construction, may present challenges for broadcasters. In addition, cable and satellite television providers must coordinate with broadcasters to ensure that they can continue to receive and transmit the digital broadcast signals. Further, certain stations that retransmit the television signals, known as translator stations, are not required to cease analog broadcasting. These stations may choose to retransmit a digital signal, or they may convert the digital signal to analog and continue to broadcast in analog after February 2009.

We plan on reporting on the progress of the DTV transition, including the status of consumer education and awareness about the DTV transition, IBM and NTIA's administration of the converter box subsidy program, and industry technical preparations throughout the upcoming transition period. We will continue to monitor government and industry consumer education efforts and plan to analyze the efforts compared with key practices for consumer outreach. In addition, we plan to survey broadcasters on the technical issues that must be addressed prior to the DTV transition date.