



January 7, 2009

The Honorable Henry A. Waxman
Chairman
House Energy and Commerce Committee
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Edward J. Markey
Chairman
House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet
2108 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairmen Waxman and Markey:

On behalf of Consumers Union, non-profit publisher of *Consumer Reports*, we write today to express our concern that the nation may not be ready for the digital television transition on February 17. We believe Congress should consider delaying the transition until a plan is in place to minimize the number of consumers who will lose TV signals, particularly by fixing the flaws in the federal coupon program created to offset the cost of this transition.

On January 4, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration announced that funding for the federal converter box coupon program had run out. NTIA is now placing hundreds of thousands of consumers onto a waiting list each day, and telling consumers to either pay for converter boxes themselves, or subscribe to cable or satellite TV service.

The federal government will receive over \$19 billion as a result of the DTV spectrum auction. Millions of consumers could now be forced to spend their own money to navigate this federally mandated transition. This economic climate is not the right time to ask consumers to dig deeper into their own pockets to pay for the miscalculation by the federal government.

Consumers need assistance to navigate the transition at the lowest cost possible. Although the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced yesterday \$8.4 million in grants to 12 grassroots groups, we are concerned the timing and level of funding for on-the-ground education is inadequate. To put the announcement yesterday into context, the United Kingdom is spending close to \$400 million to educate a population one-fifth the size of the U.S. about its digital broadcast transition.

Also troubling is the Federal Communications Commission's call center system. We are concerned that the FCC call center is not equipped to handle the flood of calls before and after the DTV switch. We are confident that with some additional time and expeditious planning the federal government can put a strategy in place to ensure that all these calls will be handled appropriately.

With February 17 only forty days away, we are concerned that millions of at-risk consumers, including rural, low-income and elderly citizens across the country could be left with blank television screens. Consumers have fewer resources than ever to buy the necessary equipment to regain access to essential news, information and emergency broadcasts. Against this backdrop, Congress should consider delaying the digital transition so the significant flaws in the converter box coupon program can be adequately addressed and sufficient local assistance put in place to help millions of consumers who are being forced navigate this transition.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joel Kelsey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Joel" being more prominent than the last name "Kelsey".

Joel Kelsey
Policy Analyst

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Murray". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Chris" being more prominent than the last name "Murray".

Christopher Murray
Senior Counsel

Cc: Representative Joe Barton
Representative Cliff Stearns