September 2011

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-11-790, a report to congressional requesters

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Enhanced Data Collection and Analysis Could Inform FCC's Efforts to Complete the Digital Transition of Low-Power Television Stations and Reallocate Spectrum

Why GAO Did This Study

Television stations that broadcast at lower power levels were not required to meet the 2009 digital transition deadline for full-power stations. These low-power television stations transmit over a smaller area, and most are less regulated than full-power stations. Low-power television stations use valuable radio frequency spectrum, and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) noted the stations' digital transition could aid its efforts to clear spectrum for wireless broadband. GAO examined (1) low-power television stations' location and status in transitioning to digital, (2) FCC's steps to transition low-power television stations to digital and whether these stations are facing challenges transitioning to digital, and (3) why low-power television stations were established and the extent to which FCC collects information to determine if low-power television service is meeting FCC's statutory and policy goals. GAO analyzed FCC data and documents, reviewed stakeholder comments, and interviewed agency officials, stakeholders, and low-power television licensees.

What GAO Recommends

FCC should (1) explore options for assessing the impact of low-power stations on the communities served and on FCC's goals, and (2) work with Congress as necessary to determine what the long-term role of Class A stations should be, whether additional stations should be permitted to apply for Class A status, and what criteria stations must meet to qualify for such status. FCC stated it is taking actions to address GAO's recommendations, and provided technical comments that were incorporated as appropriate.

View GAO-11-790 or key components. For more information, contact Mark L. Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov

What GAO Found

Thousands of over-the-air low-power television stations serve communities across the United States in both urban and rural areas, and about 60 percent of all such stations have either completed the digital transition or have taken steps to transition. Over half of all low-power television stations are known as translators, which retransmit major network and other stations' programming in areas that cannot receive the signals from a primary station, generally in rural and mountainous areas. The remaining stations include low-power television stations known as LPTV stations and Class A stations. Class A stations have a special status that gives them greater interference protection than translator and LPTV stations and requires them to broadcast a minimum amount of locally produced programming. Some LPTV and Class A stations serve niche or local audiences with ethnic, religious, or other programming.

In July 2011, FCC issued an order that established a deadline of September 1, 2015, for low-power television stations to cease analog broadcasts, but stations may still face challenges in making the transition to digital because of regulatory uncertainty. Specifically, an FCC proposal to reallocate spectrum from broadcasting to wireless broadband created regulatory uncertainty and difficulty for stations attempting to justify investing in transitioning to digital. Such a reallocation would leave fewer channels for television broadcasts and could make it difficult for low-power stations to find an available channel that does not interfere with other stations. FCC's order noted these concerns when adopting the 2015 deadline, rather than a previously proposed deadline of 2012, but it is currently unknown whether the uncertainty posed by the spectrum reallocation will be resolved prior to 2015. FCC's order adopted other measures, such as establishing a process for Class A stations to transfer their status to their new digital channels. Previously, without such a process, some stations delayed completing their transition to digital and others lost their Class A status after they transitioned to digital and ceased analog operation. According to FCC officials, such stations can apply to regain Class A status; however, stations may be unaware of this option as it is not explicit in the order.

Low-power television stations were established to reach underserved communities; FCC has noted that the stations can positively affect FCC's goals of localism and diversity. However, FCC has not collected data to evaluate the extent to which these stations fulfill unmet community needs or contribute to meeting FCC's policy goals. Specifically, FCC does not collect programming data, is limited in its ability to identify stations that are not broadcasting, and has not evaluated low-power stations' impact in assessments of the information needs of communities. Lacking such information, FCC does not know the public benefit of stations and is limited in its ability to weigh the effects of its decisions on low-power television stations against the increasing need for spectrum for broadband services. Furthermore, although FCC proposed allowing additional stations to apply for Class A status as a means to preserve community programming, it has not issued an order and may need legislative guidance to determine the future of Class A status.