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FCC Narrowbanding Deadlines

The Federal Communications Commission is well into the process of requiring oil and gas companies, electric utilities and others to transition many of their Private Land Mobile Radio Service (“PLMRS”) channels to “narrowband” operations. At the beginning of January, the first phase of the narrowbanding transition took effect: new wideband applications were prohibited. By 2013, all systems on the affected channels must be completely narrowband.

Background

The FCC began the initiative to “refarm” existing VHF and UHF spectrum in 1992, with the goal of increasing spectrum efficiency in the PLMRS. It was not until 2007, however, that a transition plan with firm deadlines was finalized.

As of January 1, 2011, the FCC is no longer accepting any applications for new wideband operations or any modifications of existing wideband stations in the 150-174 MHz and 421-512 MHz bands that expand the authorized interference contour (19 dBu for VHF, and 21 dBu for UHF). Going forward, all applications for these channels must be for “narrowband” operations only; i.e., 12.5 kHz per path for voice, or 4800 bits per second (4.8 kbps) per 6.25 kHz for data. The FCC’s 14 paging-only channels are exempt from the changes.

Additionally, the FCC is currently prohibiting the manufacture, import, and certification of any 150-174 MHz or 421-512 MHz device that is not capable of operating more than one voice channel per 25 kHz or 4800 bits per second (4.8 kbps) per 6.25 kHz for data.

January 1, 2013 Requirements

The full conversion to narrowband is scheduled to occur on January 1, 2013, when all Industrial/Business and Public Safety licensees in the 150-174 MHz and 421-512 MHz bands will be required to operate on 12.5kHz per path or lower for voice or 4800 bits per second (4.8 kbps) per 6.25 kHz for data. Licensees not in compliance with the new narrowbanding standards by January 1, 2013 will be subject to enforcement action. Given the strong emphasis the Commission has placed on narrowband conversion and the relatively long period of warning given, Commission scrutiny is expected to be tight and enforcement strict, and the FCC has stated that noncompliance could result in “admonishment, monetary fines, or loss of license.”

Implications

All licensees in the affected bands need to comply with the new narrowbanding requirements or risk enforcement action by the FCC.

Licensees who have updated their FCC paperwork and are operating stations with authorized bandwidth equal to or less than 12.5 kHz (or 4800 bits per second per 6.25 kHz for data) are already in compliance and need not take further action.

Licensees that are still transitioning to operations of 12.5 kHz or narrower (or 4.8 kbps/6.25 kHz for data) need to file a modification application with the FCC either to add a narrowband emission designator or to change their wideband emission designator to narrowband.

By January 1, 2013, all operations will need to be fully converted by narrowband.

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