

“I’ve become adamant about this -- the cost of monthly service has doubled since the Telecom Act. The companies say you get double the amount of channels, but people have not increased the time they watch,” said Mark Cooper, dir.-research at the Consumer Federation of America. Cooper’s complaint is that the cable company packaging forces consumers to pay for more channels than they may want or would have time to watch: “While they’ve more than doubled the offerings, they don’t give me the choice.”

The FCC reported last year cable rates had risen more than twice as fast 1993-2003 as the Consumer Price Index, 53.1% to 25.5% (CD Jan 29 p7). The next report on competition in video markets is being circulated on the 8th floor and is scheduled to be released in a few weeks, a Media Bureau spokeswoman said. The last report said that along with higher costs, consumers have a much wider choice and higher quality of services available due to the significant investments by operators.

Consumer groups are holding out hope for action in Congress next year on a la carte, a plan that the FCC may have quashed when it released a report casting doubt on the amount of money consumers would save with the pay-per-channel scheme (CD Nov 22 p2). “We think a la carte is the way to go -- we’re hoping Sen. Stevens (R-Alaska) will look at it,” said Consumers Union’s Montezemolo. “I think there is support at a bipartisan level to do something,” she said, adding that her group is “slowly” starting to plan for next year.

Sen. McCain (R-Ariz.), the outgoing chmn. of the Commerce Committee who is expected to become Communications Subcommittee chmn., has long been a critic of rising cable rates and pushed a la carte pricing mainly because he didn’t believe consumers should be forced to pay for high-priced programming they didn’t want, particularly sports programming. McCain held a hearing last March on a la carte, where he said: “I think it’s really time to call the cable companies’ bluff on this one.” -- *Anne Veigle, Terry Lane*

## **Nothing New?**

### **Bush Lays Out Revised GPS Shutdown Policy**

President Bush announced a new policy Wed. to shut down the country’s global positioning system (GPS) satellites temporarily during national crises to thwart terrorists’ efforts to use the navigational technology. Sources said Thurs. any shutdown of GPS would cripple systems in virtually every aspect of American life, including telecom, cable and broadcasting.

On the telecom side, many systems, including digital switches used to transfer calls, would be disrupted by a shutdown because they use clocks controlled by GPS. Telematic systems like GM’s OnStar mapping and cellular calling system would be crippled. E911 would stop functioning in most cases since it’s most commonly uses GPS devices embedded in wireless phones. A wireless technology expert noted that GPS-controlled switches are deep in carriers’ systems: “To turn off GPS would affect a lot of stuff, from the customer to the network.” GPS won’t be turned off “on a whim or on a rumor.” said Mike Swiek, exec. dir. for the U.S. GPS Industry Council. He advised those sounding alarms over the policy announcement to “take a step back [and] take a deep breath.” The policy was crafted in a “sober and rational way” and the real significance of the statement is that it demonstrates that the authorities who own and manage GPS are ensuring that the technology remains a “reliable global utility for legitimate civilian users as the global environment for satellite navigation continues to evolve.”

The only new dimension in the guidance is the inclusion of a coordinating role for the Dept. of Homeland Security, which didn’t exist when the White House last issued a statement on GPS 8 years ago, Swiek said. “Since then, markets have changed, industries have evolved, the U.S. government has changed,” and the document simply refreshes and updates the regulatory structure for GPS, Swiek said.

A GPS disablement would occur only under the most severe circumstances and would be handled at the highest levels of govt., a Bush administration official told us. The fact that the President can disrupt GPS is “old news,” the official said, adding that the govt. has always reserved right to deny GPS in times of conflict.

A shutdown would be accomplished through localized jamming to minimize disruption, not system-wide denial, the official said. As a matter of record, the official said the country’s GPS has never been “turned off” and the Administration realizes how crucial the technology is to national and international communication and commerce.

The administration sees Bush’s new policy as a “forward looking” document: The policy states that the U.S. must continue to improve and maintain GPS augmentation and backup capabilities to meet the growing needs of the public and private sectors. The policy is also intended to help the country continue to provide civil GPS services competitive with foreign-based systems, the govt. said.

Denying GPS on a broad scale outside a “theater of combat” would be an “extraordinary event,” Swiek said: “Even during 9/11, the system continued to operate.” He added that on the battlefield, localized jamming of GPS and wireless communication occurs routinely.

One satellite industry source said the Administration policy isn’t new and reflects White House authority that has never been used. “The President has always had the authority to do this,” the source said. “We had a Gulf War that was won on the back of GPS. We had 9-11 and we have a war now. The President has never shut GPS down. It would bring systems to a screeching halt.”

Broadcasters who use GPS as a standard for precise frequency control of transmitters may be affected, said Lynn Claudy, NAB senior vp-science & technology. But he said he didn’t believe many broadcasters use GPS for transmitter synchronization. -- *Howard Buskirk, Andrew Noyes, Tania Panczyk-Collins*

# Communications Daily

(ISSN 0277-0679)

PUBLISHED BY WARREN COMMUNICATIONS NEWS, INC.

Michael Feazel . . . . . Managing Editor  
 Edie Herman . . . . . Associate Managing Editor

This newsletter is available electronically via Lexis-Nexis, Factiva and Dialog.

Warren Communications News, Inc. is publisher of Communications Daily, Warren’s Washington Internet Daily, Consumer Electronics Daily, Washington Telecom Newswire, Telecom A.M., Television A.M., Television & Cable Factbook, Cable & Station Coverage Atlas, Public Broadcasting Report, Satellite Week and other special publications.

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