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FCC Grants WISPs STA to Use 5.9 GHz Band

The FCC's Wireless Telecommunications Bureau today granted special temporary authority (STA) to 33 wireless Internet service providers serving 330 counties in 29 states to use for 60 days the lower 45 megahertz of the 5.9 gigahertz band to boost their capacity to respond to increased traffic as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Like everybody else, rural Americans are facing an increased need for broadband service as more and more workers, students, and families stay home during this national emergency," said FCC Chairman Ajit Pai. "Fixed wireless broadband providers deliver this service for many communities, especially those hardest for other providers to reach. Giving them access to the 5.9 GHz band will help them meet their customers' needs during these challenging times. I want to thank these companies for all they're doing to help their customers. I also would like to thank our counterparts at the National Telecommunications and Information Administration for their cooperation."

The STA grant permits the WISPs to operate in the 5850-5895 megahertz band on an unlicensed basis.

"The pandemic's shut-in orders have really increased demand on this nation's networks," said Wireless Internet Service Providers Association President and Chief Executive Officer Claude Aiken. "This has been particularly hard on rural Americans, and those effects are only amplified by poorer access to broadband in the heartland of America."

Mr. Aiken added that his members "are seeing over a 35% bump in traffic in peak hours, with 90% of them getting customer requests to add more speed to their plans. The more capacity they can quickly put into service, the more fortified their communities are against the challenges of COVID-19."

WifiForward also welcomed today's FCC action.

"During this unprecedented crisis, Americans are depending on their Wi-Fi networks to work, learn and stay connected to critical information. Today, the FCC took an important step, allowing WISPs access to the lower 45 MHz of the 5.9 GHz band to connect people — safeguarding vital community functions and ensuring Americans are not left behind during this time of surging home and community broadband use," the group said. "This is a great opportunity to take unused spectrum and put it to work for our communities, now. The FCC is showing leadership to expand providers' network capacity during this time of crisis. WifiForward commends the Chairman and his colleagues for their leadership on this urgent issue."

But ITS America raised concerns about the FCC's decision to allow the WISPs, which already operate in the 5 GHz band, access to the 5850-5895 MHz band, which is part of the 5850-5925 MHz band that is currently allocated for dedicated short-range communications (DSRC) services but which the FCC has proposed in a notice of proposed rulemaking dividing between road-safety and unlicensed usage (TR Daily, Dec. 12, 2019).

The NPRM, which was adopted over the objections of the U.S. Department of Transportation and some auto safety interests, proposes to make the lower 45 MHz of the 5850-5925 MHz band available for unlicensed use and proposes to allocate the upper 20 MHz for cellular vehicle-to-everything (C-V2X) technology. The NPRM seeks comment on whether to allocate the remaining 10 MHz to C-V2X or DSRC technology.

“Opening up the 5.9 GHz band will be challenging because numerous Vehicle-to-Everything (V2X) safety applications are currently being used in this band. ITS America has repeatedly said it supports sharing the band with unlicensed devices such as Wi-fi, provided it can be done without interference that would jeopardize transportation safety,” said ITS America President and CEO Shailen Bhatt. “In a time of crisis, however, it is critical to not make short-term decisions that could have unknown long-term consequences for life-saving technologies.”

He added that “ITS America strongly urges the Commission make provisions for prioritizing public safety during this temporary period.”

The STA grant says that each WISP is “responsible for ensuring that it does not cause interference to existing licensees. It must review existing DSRC licenses in this band to determine any nationwide, statewide, or countywide licenses that cover or are adjacent to its service area, as well as any site licenses that are near that service area. It must then contact each of these affected licensees before beginning operation and provide its contact information so that the licensee can inform it of interference issues. It may then begin operation; it need not await a response or approval. If a complaint of interference cannot be timely resolved, operation under this STA must cease. It may not operate within 2 kilometers of any site license, regardless of notification or actual interference.” - Paul Kirby, paul.kirby@wolterskluwer.com

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