

With four more months to switch, hundreds of television stations are all digital
Brian Stelter

More than 400 television stations have stopped broadcasting in old-fashioned analog form, according to the Federal Communications Commission, months before the rescheduled transition to digital TV.

Turning off the analog signal allows stations that are short of cash to save money, but it also means a loss of service for viewers who have not yet upgraded their older television sets.

The long-awaited move to digital TV, which promises clearer pictures and more channel choices for over-the-air television viewers, had been scheduled to happen Tuesday, more than three years after the federal government set the day as the deadline for stations to cease analog broadcasting.

This month, however, the government delayed the move until June 12, citing a troubled transition process and a fear that millions of Americans would find that their televisions had been rendered incapable of receiving signals.

Despite the delay, 421 stations, most of them in smaller TV markets, chose to turn off their analog signals Tuesday. When they are combined with the 220 broadcasters that already broadcast solely in digital, the F.C.C. estimates that 36 percent of the nation's stations will have switched by Wednesday morning.

President Obama signed legislation last week that pushed back the deadline until June and allowed some stations to turn off their analog signals earlier.

Nielsen Media Research estimates that about 5.8 million households, or about 5.1 percent, have not upgraded their sets. Households that rely on rabbit ears and older analog televisions to watch TV over the air need to install a converter box to view the digital programming.

The government's coupon program to subsidize the cost of the converter boxes is experiencing a backlog; the stimulus bill Mr. Obama signed on Tuesday allots \$650 million more for the initiative.

The F.C.C. said it had sought to ensure that at least one ABC, CBS, Fox or NBC affiliate in each market would stay on the air in analog form until June.

In about 20 markets where all the major affiliates intended to turn off the analog signal on Tuesday, the agency pushed stations to keep at least one signal on the air for news and emergency information.

"We are trying to make the best of a difficult situation," Michael J. Copps, the acting chairman of the agency, said in a statement.

"While this staggered transition is confusing and disruptive for some consumers, the confusion and disruption would have been far worse had we gone ahead with a nationwide transition on Tuesday," Mr. Copps said.

In major markets like New York, all the major affiliates will remain on the air in analog until June.

San Diego is the largest market where three of the biggest affiliates are turning off their analog signals. In that market, only 7 percent of people rely on over-the-air signals.

"We have been running crawls and stories and spots, everything required by the F.C.C., in great abundance, to try to end whatever confusion there is," said Ed Trimble, the general manager of KFMB, the CBS affiliate in San Diego.

Most stations across the country are choosing to stay in both analog and digital form until June 12, meaning that viewers will see four more months of reminders to buy a converter box.

"There are still a few consumers who are not quite prepared yet, and that's why we elected to go with the delay," said Brent Hensley, the general manager of KOCO, the ABC affiliate in Oklahoma City.

Under the F.C.C.'s current rules, other stations may be allowed to turn off their analog signals in March and June.

Once stations stop analog broadcasting in local markets, the stations are bound to hear from confused consumers.

The F.C.C. said more than 4,000 people were available to answer the agency's phone number, 1-888-CALLFCC (1-888-225-5322), to help consumers who are confused about the switch.

New York Times, New York, 17 fev. 2009, 17 fev. 2009, Media & Advertising, online. Disponível em <www.nytimes.com>. Acesso em: 19 fev. 2009.

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