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TECHNOLOGY

Technology To Enhance TV Blocked

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WASHINGTON — Television viewers who are waiting for TV sets with sharply enhanced pictures will have to keep on waiting.

Federal regulators blocked an improvement in television-set technology that could be ready soon so they could push for a great leap forward in TV technology in the mid-1990s. "Our goal has to be choosing the best," said Alfred Sikes, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission.

At issue is the development of a new generation of television sets, called high-definition television, which promises to bring movie-like quality to television. HDTV sets generally would be bigger and wider than current sets and have far sharper pictures. They would also have far higher initial price tags—about $2,500, about five times the cost of conventional sets.

Yesterday, Mr. Sikes said the agency wouldn't rule on a proposed transmission technology, called Enhanced Definition-TV, which has most of the benefits of HDTV and could be put into place much more quickly, until it ruled on HDTV in the spring of 1993. That has the effect of retarding the development of the enhanced sets.

"They're looking for something better" than enhanced TV sets, said Lex Felker, a former chief of the FCC's mass-media bureau. He consults for an industry-led panel that advises the FCC on HDTV.

Zenith Electronics Corp., Glenview, Ill.,

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the only large U.S.-owned TV maker, has been championing a system called simulcast, favored by the FCC, and is probably the front-runner in the competition to be selected as the standard-bearer. NHK, the Japan Broadcasting Corp., also has a simulcast system, but is unlikely to be chosen. Indeed, the U.S. high-definition TV effort is largely directed at keeping Japanese companies from further domination of consumer electronics.

The company whose technology is chosen stands to reap royalties worth millions of dollars and could get a head start in manufacturing sets that meet the new standard. Moreover, if a U.S. standard is selected that is different from standards in Japan or Europe, foreign manufacturers would have to make different sets for different markets—reducing any potential manufacturing advantage over a U.S. set maker.

Mr. Sikes's decision to delay enhanced television is a blow to a consortium of companies that is pushing to start an enhanced TV system by 1993. The companies include General Electric Co.'s National Broadcasting Co. unit; SRI International's David Sarnoff Research Center; Thomson Consumer Electronics, a subsidiary of Thomson S.A of France; and Philips Consumer Electronics, a subsidiary of N.V. Philips of the Netherlands.

Consortium members took a low-key view of the decision, saying they would continue developing enhanced TV and also doing research into the technology favored by the FCC. The FCC, whose approval is required for changes in TV transmission standards, didn't explain fully why it wouldn't give the go-ahead to the less advanced technique now, and rule on HDTV later. But it is widely believed to fear that such a move could hamper development of the more sophisicated system. Mr. Sikes clearly believes that only the highest technology will enable the U.S to challenge Japan in this important area.

Enhanced television would broadcast over existing TV channels and offer a wider screen and sharper picture than conventional sets, but not as radical a departure as HDTV. The companies figured the improvement was enough to satisfy most consumers. They also believe enhanced TV would be easier to get started than HDTV because it wouldn't require the FCC to assign additional TV channels to broadcasters. Those proceedings can get bogged down in court challenges for years.

Whether great numbers of consumers will flock to buy any form of HDTV sets is anyone's guess. But the FCC is convinced they will. Now it is in the process of choosing among about eight different proposals to set the standard broadcasters will use to transmit programs to HDTV sets.

Simulcast broadcasts two different signals. One signal, carrying conventional images, would be broadcast to existing chanels—so TV viewers with old sets could still watch their favorite shows. A second HDTV signal would go to chanels that are now kept purposefully vacant to make sure station signals don't interfere with each other. Viewers with HDTV shows would tune into those chanels to get HDTV broadcasts.

Wayne Luplow, who is in charge of Zenith's HDTV efforts, said if his company was chosen in 1993, it could have the first sets to market within a year. But he predicted that the number of HDTV sets—and the number of shows broadcast in HDTV—would be small at first.

Mr. Sikes didn't rule out enhanced TV entirely. He said the FCC's advisory panel would test how well it worked just as it tested HDTV systems. But he suggested that enhanced TV could be selected if full HDTV wasn't ready to go by the spring of 1993. Hedging his decision that way, though, gave hope to the enhanced-TV proponents.

"Simulcast might not make it," said Jack Fuhrer, director of Sarnoff's television-research laboratory. "Enhanced television might have advantages in cost and ease of technology." But, to be on the safe side, Sarnoff is developing a simulcast system too.