

FCC Committee Calls for Merger of HDTV Systems

By JEANNINE AVERSA

WASHINGTON — A Federal Communications Commission panel strongly encouraged proponents of the four systems in the running for the high-definition TV standard to "merge" their systems into a single, composite system by March 15 or April 1.

The FCC's Advisory Committee on Advanced Television Service adopted the so-called "grand alliance" plan Wednesday. Some ob-

servers viewed it as a move to pressure the proponents into reaching an agreement.

Discussions among the parties on a "merged" system — in which they would combine the best elements of each system — have failed to produce an accord after several months.

Although there was no opposition to the plan, Donald Rumsfeld, chairman and CEO of General Instrument Corp., which has two systems in the running — DigiCipher and,

with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Channel Compatible DigiCipher — predicted that an agreement on a merged system will be "difficult to achieve."

Merger discussions have taken place among GI/MIT; Zenith Electronics/AT&T, proponents of the Digital Spectrum Compatible HDTV system; and the Advanced Television Research Consortium, composed of the David Sarnoff Research Center, North American

Philips, Thomson Consumer Electronics, NBC and Compression Labs Inc. The ATRC's system is called Advanced Digital-High Definition Television (AD-HDTV).

While the ATRC has been portrayed as resisting a merger, Philips Laboratories president Peter Bingham said the ATRC is "excited by the prospects of the grand alliance" and he doesn't want people to view the consortium as holding out.

Under the new plan, proponents

have until March 15 or April 1 to work out an agreement. If one doesn't emerge, the FCC will conduct one month of testing on each system, beginning somewhere around that time.

A lottery conducted last Wednesday determined the order of testing in case there's no deal. GI would go first with its DigiCipher system, the ATRC would go second, GI and MIT would be third with their Channel Compatible DigiCipher system and Zenith/AT&T would go last with their DSC HDTV system.

Advisory Committee officials appeared to hold the door open to a merger agreement taking place after individual testing begins.

If the groups reach an agreement before the March 15-April 1 window, Advisory Committee Chairman Dick Wiley said, proponents would have 6 months to build the new system, after which further testing would take place.

While the cable industry supports the grand alliance plan, several cable representatives, who asked not to be identified, said they are worried that some of the system elements they like may be left out of a composite system.

For instance, cable groups consider Zenith's 16 VSB transmission technique the best of all four systems and wouldn't want to see that dropped. "If that were left behind, we'd be upset," one cable representative said.

If no composite system ever emerges, the advisory committee will end up picking a winner out of the four systems. Once it makes this selection, probably in the fall, field-testing will begin.

Attorney Brenda Fox, on behalf of the National Cable Television Association, asked that the committee conduct field-testing on all four systems, then select a winner. The committee turned down the request.

However, the NCTA's Wendell Bailey said: "We [individual systems] may go off and do it [field-testing] on our own."

Under the new schedule, the full FCC probably won't adopt an HDTV standard until "early 1994," Wiley said. Originally, a new standard was expected by this spring. ■