

I Want My HDTV

By Richard E. Wiley

WASHINGTON
After an eight-year cooperative effort between the Government and industry, the United States leads the world in the development of digital high-definition television.

But Congressional concerns, arising in connection with enactment of the new telecommunications act, may derail the careful transition that the Federal Communications Commission has planned from our existing video system to the new technology.

HDTV will provide viewers with dazzlingly clear, wide-screen TV pictures and CD-like sound. But such a technical advance is not just about prettier TV. What beckons is a new

Richard E. Wiley, former chairman of the F.C.C., was head of its Advisory Committee on Advanced Television Service. Now a Washington lawyer, he represents communications companies.

era in which digital TV receivers, incorporating computer intelligence, will provide easy access to the information superhighway and its advanced digital services.

The United States' role in HDTV began in 1987 when the F.C.C. organized an industry advisory committee to help establish a new broadcast transmission standard (the existing standard was set in 1941). After reviewing numerous proposals, it determined that systems using digital transmission were superior to the older analog technology. It then urged the remaining proponents to switch to digital and ultimately merge into a single consortium.

After exhaustive testing, this system has now been recommended to the F.C.C. as the basis of a new national standard. It represents a tremendous advance in TV technology that will allow broadcasters to deliver not only HDTV but, in different times of the day, multiple lower resolution programs and data services. The system also works with computers and other imaging technologies.

To bring about digital TV, the F.C.C. has planned to lend a second channel

Congress could slow down digital technology.

to each TV station, employing frequencies reserved for broadcasters but unused because of signal interference. Fortunately, digital transmission will permit much more efficient use of this spectrum. The F.C.C. intends a gradual transition to the new service, enabling viewers to use their analog sets for a number of years. When the transition is completed, the existing channels would be returned to the Government for other uses.

Critics on Capitol Hill and elsewhere have raised a number of objections:

- That it represents a giveaway of valuable frequencies to broadcasters. But in reality it is only an exchange of one block for another, with the public getting a greatly enhanced service.

Broadcasters would not be allowed to retain two channels permanently.

- That new legislation should require an auction of the HDTV spectrum. But this would disrupt the F.C.C.'s planned transition to digital broadcasting and likely lead to HDTV's development as a subscription service, offered only by cable and satellite. A better alternative is to auction the existing channels, which, when returned in a concentrated spectrum block, should be more valuable than the dispersed digital frequencies.

- That broadcasters should be given less than a full second channel. But the consortium system cannot be so divided, requiring the lengthy design and testing of an entirely new transmission system.

- That lower resolution digital TV is as good as HDTV. But hundreds of advisory committee experts did not agree, judging HDTV as a quantum leap forward.

Government leaders must determine where the public interest lies in this debate. But it is essential that they understand the technical, economic and social benefits in digital TV and its many spinoff services. □