



Highlights of [GAO-08-43](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Digital Television Transition and Public Safety Act of 2005 requires all full-power television stations to cease analog broadcasting by February 17, 2009. Following this digital television transition, consumers who receive over-the-air television signals on analog sets will need to take action to be able to view digital broadcasts. The act also requires the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to create a program that subsidizes consumers' purchases of digital-to-analog converter boxes. This requested report examines progress made (1) by federal entities and others in facilitating the transition, (2) in educating consumers on the transition, and (3) in implementing the converter box subsidy program. GAO reviewed legal, agency, and industry documents; interviewed public, private, and other stakeholders; and convened an expert panel focused on consumer outreach.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FCC, in conjunction with public and private stakeholders, develop a comprehensive plan for the various aspects of the DTV transition. In commenting on this report, FCC and the Department of Commerce (which contains NTIA) noted the steps they had taken to facilitate the transition, but neither indicated whether they agreed or disagreed with the recommendation. A more detailed discussion of their comments is in our report.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-43](#). For more information, contact Mark L. Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

DIGITAL TELEVISION TRANSITION

Increased Federal Planning and Risk Management Could Further Facilitate the DTV Transition

What GAO Found

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and NTIA, in conjunction with other stakeholders, have taken actions to facilitate the digital television (DTV) transition. FCC has primary responsibility to regulate the broadcast television industry and, as such, has set deadlines for broadcasters to upgrade station equipment and conducted periodic reviews related to the transition. NTIA has issued a contract for services related to its converter box subsidy program. Industry stakeholders, including broadcasters, have begun to prepare for the transition. Despite these efforts, GAO found no comprehensive plan or strategy to measure progress and results. Such planning includes managing and mitigating risks, which can help organizations identify potential problems before they occur and target limited resources. GAO has reported on the benefits of risk management in helping organizations involved in high stakes efforts similar to the DTV transition.

FCC, NTIA, industry, and other private sector stakeholders have made progress in educating consumers about the DTV transition, but these efforts are mostly in the planning phase, and challenges remain. Both FCC and NTIA have developed informational materials on the transition and begun reaching out to consumer and stakeholder groups. Private sector stakeholders are leading consumer outreach efforts on a voluntary basis. This includes developing a coalition of over 160 business, trade, and other organizations committed to providing consumers with information about the transition; planning public service announcements; developing Web sites; and encouraging media coverage. An expert panel GAO convened identified key practices for consumer education planning, including coordinating among stakeholders, constructing consistent messages, researching target audiences, and establishing metrics to measure success. The expert panel also noted that potential challenges for consumer outreach include prioritizing limited resources, educating consumers who do not necessarily need to take action, and reaching underserved populations. It remains unclear whether public-private sector interaction can ensure a consistent message to prevent consumer confusion.

NTIA has made progress in implementing a subsidy program for converter boxes, but the program faces challenges. The current program allows households to request up to two \$40 coupons toward the purchase of eligible converter boxes. While the program's outcome depends on the ability of NTIA and its contractor to encourage and coordinate the voluntary participation of retailers and manufacturers, NTIA remains ultimately responsible for the program. There is also uncertainty regarding retailer readiness and participation in the program, as well as potential challenges related to inventory planning. If retailers' participation is limited or delayed, consumers might face difficulties in redeeming their coupons for converter boxes, without which some might lose access to television programming.