Keeping Up A Fast Pace On Spectrum

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Last Friday, I had the honor of participating in a White House summit on 5G, the next generation of wireless communications.  At the event, I discussed the [FCC’s plan](https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-354323A1.pdf) to Facilitate American Superiority in 5G Technology.  Our [5G FAST plan](https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-354326A1.pdf) focuses on freeing up spectrum, promoting wireless infrastructure, and modernizing regulations.  It will help deliver unprecedented benefits to wireless consumers in this country.

And on the heels of the summit’s conclusion, I’m pleased to announce that the FCC’s October agenda will address three issues critical to advancing the 5G FAST Plan—creating more opportunities for unlicensed innovation in the 6 GHz band, expanding spectrum opportunities for 5G in the 3.5 GHz band, and updating our business data services rules for smaller, rural carriers in order to promote fiber deployment.

Let’s start with something we all know and love: Wi-Fi.  Wi-Fi was enabled by the FCC’s decision to make certain spectrum available for unlicensed use—that is, anybody could use these airwaves without having to get approval from the FCC (as long as they weren’t causing harmful interference to others).  As Wi-Fi has become more popular, so has the demand for more unlicensed spectrum to accommodate this traffic.  Last year, the FCC launched an inquiry on how to expand unlicensed use in the 6 GHz band.  Based on this study, I’m proposing new rules allowing unlicensed devices to use this band.  My proposal would promote efficient use of spectrum that may otherwise not be used at all—and it could make over 1 gigahertz of new unlicensed spectrum available.  This last point bears elaboration: this massive amount of spectrum could enable faster Wi-Fi connections and substantially expand the reach of Internet access providers that use unlicensed spectrum, like small, competitive fixed wireless companies.  And it would enable mobile broadband companies to supplement their licensed holdings for 5G.  We hope to do all this while fully protecting existing and future licensed operations from harmful interference.

Next, let’s turn to making more licensed spectrum available for 5G.  In the coming months, we’ll be auctioning off high-band, millimeter-wave spectrum (that’s the [28 GHz and 24 GHz auctions](https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-353228A1.pdf), the first of which is slated to start on November 14).  But we also want to free up mid-band spectrum for 5G and other flexible uses.  Commissioner Mike O’Rielly has taken the lead on exploring ways to better use the 3.5 GHz band, and I commend him for his efforts.  This month, we’ll take up the plan he’s developed.  It makes targeted changes to our rules to promote investment and innovation in this important band.  For example, by allowing providers to renew 3.5 GHz licenses, we will substantially increase their incentives to deploy 5G networks using this spectrum.

Speaking of promoting investment, we’ll also vote on modernizing our rules governing business data services for certain small rural carriers—specifically, those known as Alternative Connect America Model, or A-CAM, carriers.  Easy enough, right?  Back in March, when I teed up this proposal, I warned you that this issue is “[admittedly a little arcane.](https://medium.com/@AjitPaiFCC/no-spring-break-for-the-fcc-2533adbd8ea3)”  That hasn’t changed—but neither has the pro-rural impact.  This order would enable rural companies to take resources currently wasted on regulatory compliance and devote them to building stronger networks and delivering better services.  This is important because the wireless networks of the future will rely on these high-capacity broadband connections for “backhaul,” which essentially means the wires that carry traffic from a wireless small cell or tower back to the core of a network.  And much more backhaul will be needed for the 5G future—particularly for those living in rural America.

Telecom policy has dominated this post so far, but I haven’t forgotten the media side of the ledger.  Continuing our *Modernization of Media Regulation Initiative*, I’m making two proposals to update our media rules to reflect today’s marketplace, bringing the total number of rulemakings under this effort to a lucky thirteen.

The first proposal explores whether to fundamentally change the FCC’s decades-old cable rate regulatory scheme, with the goal of modernizing and simplifying our rules.  The industry has changed dramatically since these rules were adopted.  Because of increasing competition in the video marketplace, our rate regulations today only apply to a very small percentage of our nation’s cable systems.  Yet, we have pages and pages of rate regulation rules on the books that are inordinately complicated and characterized by complex rate regulation forms.  It’s time to take a hard look at updating and simplifying these regulations.

The other Media Modernization item on the agenda recognizes this thing called the Internet, ending a filling requirement that requires broadcasters to submit paper copies of certain contracts to the FCC. Given that television stations along with AM and FM radio stations are already required to allow the public to obtain these documents through their online public inspection files, it no longer makes sense to mandate that broadcasters send hard copies of these documents to the Commission.

Media regulations aren’t the only ones yellowing with age.  For far too long, companies have been struggling under our arcane rules for narrowband services, or “private land mobile radio” services as they’re commonly called.  For example, today companies have to request waivers to take advantage of new, more efficient technology and repurpose gaps in frequencies that are going unused.  So we’re taking steps to enable more intensive use of this workhorse spectrum on which first responders, state and local governments, large and small businesses, electric utilities, transportation providers, the medical community, and many others depend.  I recognize the critical role narrowband spectrum plays in our economy.  That’s why we’ll vote on (among other things) eliminating unnecessary restrictions in our rules, boosting capacity by making way for new “interstitial” channels, and ending an outdated “freeze” on spectrum sharing that was first put into place in 1995.

Also, on this month’s agenda will be an item from the FCC’s Enforcement Bureau.  You know the drill by now:  The FCC can’t discuss law enforcement matters publicly before we vote on them, and [as it was once memorably put, even I am not above the policy](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRgsfHc8kqU#t=17s).

With that, here’s wishing everybody a happy October.  May your fall be as enjoyable as this guy’s: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkGvs20DfFE>