

BPL OFFERS HIGH-SPEED OPTION

by Donny Jackson

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While the FCC's first steps to develop rules for voice over IP grabbed all the headlines, the commission earlier this month also issued a notice for proposed rulemaking for regulations that would apply to broadband-over-power-line technology, which could provide another broadband choice to most U.S. homes.

Used in several countries, BPL has been relegated to small trials by electric utilities in the U.S. Data is transmitted over frequencies different than those used for the line's original purpose — electricity. Because of the ubiquitous nature of power lines, the technology is particularly attractive to an FCC seeking to make broadband access available to all Americans.

“When you solve access in the last mile, suddenly a lot of the things we're grappling with go away because competitors will have multiple ways to get to the customer,” FCC Commissioner Kathleen Abernathy said at a Precursor Group conference. “Historically, technology has solved a lot of our regulatory problems, and I'm hopeful that will happen again.”

BPL's most significant technical problems relate to concerns expressed by amateur radio operators and emergency responders, who fear the technology could emit enough radiation to create interference in their operations. With this in mind, the NPRM calls for BPL providers to comply with Part 15 rules and take responsibility for mitigating any interference quickly.

Such stipulations were part of “the expectations going in,” according to Brett Kilbourne, director of regulatory services and associate counsel for the United Telecom Council, which represents utility companies. While supportive of the FCC addressing the technology, the association will reserve its opinion on the NPRM until the written proposal is released, he said.

Depending on the architecture used, BPL can deliver access speeds between 500 kb/s to 3 Mb/s, Kilbourne said. Some BPL technologies use the wireline that enters the home, while others deliver the bandwidth via a Wi-Fi network that extends from a streetlight or utility pole.

Beyond the technical issues, BPL providers need to prove that the technology can be

deployed profitably, according to Scott Cleland, CEO of The Precursor Group.

“A lot of things work in a lab,” Cleland said. “But they have to prove it works in the field, that it's a real business.”

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