

FCC OKs rules for BPL technology

By Donny Jackson

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FCC commissioners yesterday approved rules governing the deployment of broadband over power lines while hailing the technology as a potential third wire into homes and possibly the most ubiquitous broadband option in the United States.

"This technology is tremendously exciting," FCC Chairman Michael Powell said. "It's got a long way to go, but this really has the potential to be the great broadband hope for a good part of rural America."

Indeed, the idea that power lines available in virtually every structure in the U.S. could be used to provide broadband services may have significant impact on the manner in which Universal Service goals are pursued, most commissioners acknowledged.

BPL's big technical hurdle is interference, a concern noted by the military and ham radio operators. To combat this, the FCC's notice of proposed rulemaking placed the burden of mitigating interference on BPL operators, who would be required to quickly fix problems by reducing power levels, switching frequencies or shutting down devices to address interference noted by existing licensed users.

Each commissioner expressed the importance of mitigating interference, but they all emphasized the belief that such concerns could be addressed.

"We need to be mindful of harmful interference, but we can't let unsupported claims stand in the way of this kind of innovation," Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein said. "We need to do everything we can to try to move this forward. We need to find a new competitive pipe into the home. This is one that's available and ubiquitous. It offers enormous potential for the kind of competition we seek."

Michael Copps was the only FCC commissioner to express any negative opinion, noting that his partial dissent was based on the belief that the commission had failed to answer some of the "hard questions" regarding BPL's impact on Universal Service, CALEA, E911, pole attachment regulations and—most important—the potential for cross-subsidization by monopolistic electric companies.

"Is it right to allow electric ratepayers to pay higher bills every month to subsidize an electric company's foray into broadband?" Copps asked.

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