

FCC tentatively sets March 29, 2016, as start date for 600 MHz incentive auction

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The FCC currently plans to start next year's incentive auction of 600 MHz broadcast TV spectrum on March 29, 2016, according to an FCC website. That would keep the agency just on target to meet FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler's goal of starting the complex auction in the first quarter of next year, which ends March 31.

Last week the FCC postponed its vote on rules for the incentive auction until Aug. 6 after pressure from Congress to push back the vote that had been planned for the agency's July 16 meeting. The FCC is going to allow more time for stakeholders, including broadcasters and carriers, to review information to the FCC and submit filings on the rules.

Accordingly, the FCC moved that agenda item onto its list of items that are currently "on circulation," meaning that they are being reviewed by the FCC's five commissioners before being voted on before the full commission. The item is titled: "Broadcast Incentive Auction to Begin March 29, 2016; Procedures for Competitive Bidding in Auction 1000, Including Initial Clearing Target Determination, Qualifying to Bid, and Bidding in Auctions 1001 (Reverse) and 1002 (Forward)."

Wheeler reiterated his first-quarter start date goal last week despite the delay in the vote. "Moving forward on the Incentive Auction is a national priority for both economic growth and deficit reduction," Wheeler wrote in a letter to Reps. Fred Upton (R-Mich.) and Greg Walden (R-Ore.) "I remain committed to achieving our joint goal of beginning the auction in the first quarter of 2016."

The delay pushed back by several weeks decisions on how the auction will be structured, the rules for opening bid prices for broadcasters' spectrum, rules governing whether TV stations will be placed into guard bands, and how large the spectrum reserve will be for airwaves set aside for smaller carriers to bid on.

"If the item is adopted, that would be the date the auction is scheduled to begin," FCC spokesman Charles Meisch told *FierceWireless* regarding the item that is out on circulation. However, the FCC commissioners may choose to change or amend the item before it is voted

on, so the exact start date of the auction could change.

The incentive auction will consist of two main parts--a "reverse" auction and a "forward" auction. First, in the reverse auction broadcasters will agree to sell their spectrum rights, with prices going down in each round. After each round of the reverse auction the FCC will "repack" the broadcasters based on the results of each round, so that the broadcasters know whether or not there is space for them in the TV band.

Once the rules for the reverse auction are met, then the "forward auction" is held for carriers to bid on generic blocks of broadcaster spectrum. There will also be an "assignment round" in the forward auction for carriers to bid on specific spectrum bands. If the FCC's "final stage rule" is met, which relates to raising enough money to cover broadcaster relocation costs and meeting a specific price per MHz-POP threshold, then bidding on the reserved spectrum can begin. After the auction ends, the FCC will then reassign broadcasters into new channels.

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