

Feds share coupons to help TV transition (AP)

WASHINGTON - Millions of \$40 government coupons become available Tuesday to help low-tech television owners buy special converter boxes for older TVs that might not work after the switch to digital broadcasting.

Beginning Feb. 18, 2009, anyone who does not own a digital set and still gets their programming via over-the-air antennas will no longer receive a picture.

That's the day the television industry completes its transition from old-style analog broadcasting to digital.

The converter boxes are expected to cost between \$50 and \$70 and will be available at most major electronics retail stores. Starting Tuesday, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration will begin accepting requests for two \$40 coupons per household to be used toward the purchase of the boxes.

Viewers who have satellite or cable service will not need a box.

To request a coupon, consumers can apply online at <http://www.dtv2009.gov> starting Tuesday. The government also has set up a 24-hour hotline to take requests, 1-888-DTV-2009 (1-888-388-2009).

Congress, in ordering the transition to digital broadcasting, set aside \$1.5 billion for the coupon program, which will fund 33.5 million coupons and other costs.

The giveaway basically works under the honor system.

The first 22 million coupons will go to all households that request them. That includes a residence that gets cable service for one television but has a spare TV that still uses an antenna, for example.

The rest of the coupons, however, are meant only for those who do not subscribe to a pay-television service.

The Nielsen Co. estimates that 14.3 million households, or about 13 percent of the 112.8 million total television households in the nation, rely on over-the-air television broadcasts for programming.

Tony Wilhelm, director of consumer education for NTIA, said the agency expects to have enough coupons to satisfy demand. "We think the high number will be 26 million," he said. "Low end is 10 million."

Members of Congress have criticized both the National Telecommunications and Information Administration and the Federal Communications Commission for their work on the transition to digital television.

In November, the Government Accountability Office, Congress' investigative arm, released a report that concluded there is "no comprehensive plan" for the transition.

Most of the concern rests with public education campaigns. While Congress allocated \$1.5 billion for the coupon program, only \$5 million was for education. The Association for Public Television Stations reported in September that 51 percent of participants surveyed were unaware that the transition was taking place.

Since then, the broadcast industry has announced a voluntary public education campaign. The FCC is circulating a plan among commissioners that would make public education efforts by broadcasters mandatory.

Congress ordered the transition to digital broadcasting to make more efficient use of the publicly owned airwaves.

On Jan. 24, the FCC will auction off the spectrum currently used for analog television. That portion of the airwaves will be sold to wireless providers and is expected to bring in as much as \$15 billion. A portion of the spectrum will also be dedicated for use by emergency responders.