

FCC Consumer Advisory

Video Descriptions and the Digital Television Transition

IF YOU CURRENTLY USE AVAILABLE VIDEO DESCRIPTIONS TO ACCESS TELEVISION PROGRAMMING, YOU SHOULD BE AWARE OF THE FOLLOWING REGARDING THE DIGITAL TELEVISION (DTV) TRANSITION:

- By June 12, 2009, all full power broadcast television stations will broadcast only in digital format.
- Your local broadcasters may make the transition before then, and some already have. So be ready.
- The DTV transition will provide broadcasters with a greater number of audio channels with which they may provide voluntary video description.
- Digital-to-analog converter boxes are not required to process all associated audio services broadcast by a DTV station, so consumers should check with manufacturers and retailers to learn more about whether specific digital-to-analog converter boxes are able to provide video descriptions.
- Although televisions with digital tuners should be able to process the audio services associated with DTV signals, consumers should confirm that a particular digital television includes this feature by checking with the appropriate manufacturer or retailer.
- If purchasing a digital television or digital-to-analog converter box, consumers should ask the manufacturer or retailer how audio streams are accessed, and whether the remote control and on-screen menus are accessible to individuals with vision disabilities.
- Consumers using multi-channel video services (e.g., cable or satellite) should ask their service provider for additional information about the availability of video description. To the extent that such providers receive programming with video description, those video descriptions should be delivered to the consumer.

Video Description Background

Video descriptions are a way to inform people who are blind or have other vision disabilities of what is happening on the television screen. Video description is the insertion of verbal descriptions about the setting and/or action in a program when information about these visual elements is not contained in the audio portion of the program. These descriptions supplement the regular audio track of the program.

Some programming has contained video descriptions for a number of years. At present, video descriptions are available through the secondary audio programming (SAP) channel on an analog stereo TV set or VCR.

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In July 2000, the FCC adopted rules to make television more accessible to people with vision disabilities by mandating that a certain amount of programming contain video description. These rules took effect in April 2002, but were vacated by a federal court in November 2002. As a result, video description is not required. Nevertheless, some programming providers voluntarily continue to provide video descriptions. Also, the requirement in Section 79.2 of the FCC's rules that emergency information provided on television be accessible to individuals who have vision disabilities is still in place. This means that broadcasters must orally describe any emergency information that is shown on the screen (*e.g.*, weather map showing tornadoes) and must accompany any emergency information that is not orally described (*i.e.*, information presented in a crawl or scroll) with an aural tone which instructs individuals with vision disabilities to turn to a radio or another source for more information.

Impact of Digital Television Transition on Video Description

With digital television, broadcasters have more audio channels on which to provide video description. Because digital television encodes audio in a different manner than the encoding used in analog television, digital television does not utilize a SAP channel to transmit video descriptions. The digital television standards provide for two types of main audio service and six types of associated services, including associated services for people with vision disabilities. The standards also permit the transmission of secondary language programming. So while there was one option under the old analog TV service (*i.e.*, the SAP channel), broadcasters now have more audio channels to provide this voluntary service. However, we note that inserting video descriptions into digital programming that was not created by the distributor may involve additional expense for broadcasters; for this reason, consumers should contact their local broadcasters to determine whether video description is offered.

Televisions with digital tuners should be able to process the audio services associated with the digital TV signals through functions that are built into their systems. Consumers should confirm with the manufacturer, owner's manual or retailer prior to purchase to determine if this feature is included in the digital TV. For consumers who will be using a digital-to-analog converter box to receive digital over-the-air television signals on an analog television, we note that some of the digital-to-analog converter boxes that have been approved for NTIA coupon eligibility are capable of processing the associated audio services that are broadcast by a digital television station. In particular, the WGBH National Center for Accessible Media, located in Boston, Massachusetts, has found that two specific coupon-eligible digital-to-analog converter boxes – the Digital Stream DTX 9900 and Insignia NS-DXA1 – have demonstrated the capability to pass through video description.¹ However, because coupon-eligible digital-to-analog converter boxes are not required to have this feature, consumers are advised to check with the manufacturer, owner's manual or retailer prior to purchase to determine if a specific digital-to-analog converter box will serve their particular needs.

¹ WGBH's National Center for Accessible Media is not affiliated in any way with the FCC, nor is this an endorsement of either the Digital Stream or Insignia digital-to-analog converter box by the FCC. The FCC does not endorse any particular converter box. We also note that this is not intended to provide an exhaustive list; other coupon-eligible digital-to-analog converter boxes also may have the ability to pass through video description. To the extent other boxes with this functionality exist and are brought to our attention, we will update this advisory.



Accessing additional audio program streams (including video description) typically occurs either through a designated button on the remote control or through an on-screen menu. Unfortunately, if the controls on the television or digital-to-analog converter box are not accessible to people with vision disabilities, it may be a challenge to obtain the descriptions. In such cases, the consumer must know which audio stream the video description is on in advance, as well as how to access this channel. We therefore urge consumers to ask the manufacturer or retailer how audio streams are accessed prior to purchasing a digital television or digital-to-analog converter box. In addition, the consumer should ask whether the on-screen menus – as well as the remote controls that are used to access the on-screen menus – are accessible to individuals who have vision disabilities. Finally, the consumer should contact local television stations to see if they are transmitting video descriptions, and if so, for which programs.

Consumers using cable or satellite services should ask for additional information about the availability of video description from their service providers. To the extent that cable systems, satellite systems or other multi-channel video programming distributors receive programming with video description, those video descriptions should be delivered to the consumer. As with broadcast television, subscription-based television consumers must ensure that their television is capable of displaying available video descriptions and that video description functionality may be accessed by people with vision disabilities.

For More Information

To find out more about the digital television transition, visit our Web site at www.dtv.gov. For more information about telecommunications issues, visit the FCC's Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau Web site at www.fcc.gov/cgb, or contact the FCC's Consumer Center by e-mailing fccinfo@fcc.gov; calling 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY; faxing 1-866-418-0232; or writing to:

Federal Communications Commission
 Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau
 Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
 445 12th Street, SW
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