

Announcement of analogue TV switch-off in New Zealand

16 September 2010

The New Zealand government has announced that analogue TV transmissions will be switched off by the end of 2013. The process will be in stages starting with the West Coast and Hawkes Bay in late 2012. This timescale is earlier than was formerly indicated, but in line with the lobbying by the telecommunications sector, which would like the spectrum to be vacated sooner rather than later.

This is a watershed date for television and comes nearly 54 years after TV first commenced broadcasting in this country.

What does it mean for commercial operations and for domestic users like you and me.

Motels and Hotels

Many motel and hotel operations still have analogue TV sets in rooms. This includes flat screen sets because most of these do not have digital tuners. Larger operators have a SKY satellite source and these will largely not be affected. Freeview receivers can be connected to the same satellite dish if the Freeview only services such as TVNZ6 and TVNZ7 are desired.

Smaller operations rely on analogue TV reception and will have to make some choices. They can have Freeview HD (UHF) if they are in a coverage area. Freeview HD will soon be extended into some provincial towns, but there will remain about 15% of the population who will never get UHF Freeview. These people will have to get satellite. Freeview satellite means buying a dish and associated parts.

Whether UHF or satellite, the setup for small motels is they have a central point which has one receiver for every channel they want to send to the rooms. The receivers have a UHF analogue output or separate boxes must convert each receiver video output to a UHF channel. There are more sophisticated options such as all-in-one units that can receive the Freeview satellite services and produce a number of UHF analogue outputs to feed to all the rooms. The down-side to an all-in-one box is that a failure can mean you lose all TV. The cheaper arrangement of a stack of domestic receivers means one failure only loses one channel. Examples of the all-in-one solution are Terra MMH3000, Triax TDH700 or Fagor DiSat 6U. The all-in-ones cost between NZ\$5000 and \$8000 and so are suited to the slightly larger operations. Each of these models is supported in New Zealand. If motel operators wanted to go this way, it is advisable to ask suppliers about turn-around time to repair, what spares are held and what options for handling different aspect ratio pictures there are available in the box.

Domestic viewers

Viewers also have a number of decisions to make. If you have a TV with Freeview built-in then you will still get TV. If you have an old set, you don't need to throw it out, but you will need a Freeview receiver, *also called a set-top box*. Having said that, new TV's with Freeview built-in are not much more expensive than a set top box. I have seen a 26" Freeview set for only NZ\$650 compared to a Freeview HD set top box for between \$250 and \$350.

Remember, TV sets with built-in Freeview are only for UHF, not satellite!

If you can only get satellite Freeview, or prefer it, then you must have a set-top box.

Recorders

Your existing VCR and DVD recorders will be largely obsolete. (You can connect them up to your set-top box but you can only record the same channel you are currently watching.) You could buy a 2nd set-top box for the recorder, but most people will not want to do this.

Instead of a straight receiver, you might instead buy a Freeview PVR (personal video recorder). These are more expensive than a simple receiver but do give you the option of recording two Freeview programmes at the same time, while even watching a third programme (with some limitations). At the current time, PVR's cost between NZ\$550 and \$800.

Your TV's in other rooms

Since the 2nd and 3rd sets in a house are usually the older sets that used to be in the lounge, they will be analogue only and therefore will not work by themselves. There are options. You could buy another Freeview TV set and just throw the old sets away. You could buy another set-top box for each TV set. However, that starts to get expensive. You could run coax from your lounge set top box to the other sets but that can get a bit messy. There are things called video-senders around. The simple ones are connected to the main set top box in the lounge and emit a UHF channel of their own. That can be received by the other sets in the house. Of course, you only get the channel that the set top box is tuned to at the time. More sophisticated video senders have an infra-red return channel, which means you can take the remote for your set top box to bed with you and change the channels from your bedroom.

Disposing of old equipment

There will be a lot of old TV's, VCR's, HDD recorders and dilapidated VHF aerials ending up on Trade-Me or in land-fills. Good business for Trade-Me, but not so good for landfills. I trust that charitable organizations will set up collection points for this stuff so that useable items can be given to schools and other institutions or otherwise disposed of properly.

Power Consumption

Because the analogue TV switch off forces most people to buy set top boxes, PVR's or video senders, there will be a net national increase of domestic power consumption. I am confident the government has factored this into their calculations of financial returns to the country and also into the calculations of the country's power supply requirements for the future.

Axino-Tech Consulting & Services Ltd

www.axino-tech.co.nz