



THE PUBLIC BROADCASTING REPORT

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Wis. Trial

Public TV to Test Video Delivery to Handhelds in Madison

Public TV will test a DTV datacast to deliver video to mobile devices as part of a hybrid WiMAX/WiFi network, a move officials see as promising to boost station revenue. Wis. Public Bestg. soon will test DTV fed into WiFi and other wireless networks in Madison in collaboration with the U. of Wis. and several vendors, APTS Pres. John Lawson told us. The move dovetails with APTS-led digital emergency alert system (EAS) trials funded by the Homeland Security Dept. (DHS), Lawson said.

Despite initial buzz, “we have not seen datacasting business models emerge that are ready to market,” Lawson said. Since the FCC ruled in 2001 that public TV stations can use excess digital spectrum to make money, public broadcasters have been eyeing revenue opportunities, mainly datacasting subscription models. Lawson said public TV sees chances for DTV playing a role in mobile video ventures the wireless industry is beginning to deploy. The vision is for DTV streamed to a WiMAX base station as a kind of head-end for video delivered via Wi-Fi in a metro area, he said. “There is real synergy between the digital EAS deployment that we are beginning, which does rely on retransmission of a digital signal from the public broadcaster,” Lawson said. It can have other uses, such as sending informational video to handhelds, he added.

Seventeen public stations submitted proposals for the 2nd phase of the APTS-DHS EAS trial that would expand the project beyond the Washington, D.C., area (CD Sept 29/2004 p7), Lawson said. A \$500,000 DHS grant expanded the trial to stations dealing with different terrain, environments, population densities and other factors that could affect alert system performance, Lawson said. About 10 stations are expected to be chosen by DHS for the project, he said. Other participants include Cingular, Verizon, Nextel, T-Mobile and Sprint, CTIA, FCC, Federal Emergency Management Agency, XM, Comcast and NCTA. If Congress passes the “WARN” bill that recently passed the Senate, he said, the pilot could “simply roll into a national deployment,” he said.

With Madison officials and first responders involved, the Wis. Public Bestg. project is being cast as a public service, said Lawson. But it would create “revenue opportunities” for stations if it proves viable, he added. The first phase of the digital EAS pilot validated DTV datacasting as a “delivery vehicle,” he said, which “helps cement the importance of local public broadcaster as a community institution.”