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Press Release

March 9, 2005

**EMBARGOED TO
A.M., MARCH 10,
2003**

FCC TAKES IMPORTANT STEP TO PROMOTE WIRELESS BROADBAND

WASHINGTON, DC – Media Access Project (MAP), Free Press (FP), and the New America Foundation (NAF) praised the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) today for taking an important step in promoting shared spectrum in the 3650-3700 MHz band Order released today. The order will allow noncommercial community wireless networks (CWNs) and commercial wireless ISPs (WISPs) to access much needed new spectrum on a shared basis. But the groups added that the final version of the order must make sure that CWNs will really have access to the spectrum on equal footing with commercial WISPs.

“The Commission has taken a huge step in making wireless broadband available to people who don’t have access to DSL and cable broadband, or who can’t afford it,” said Harold Feld, Senior Vice President of Media Access Project (MAP). MAP, a non-profit public interest law firm, represented several non-commercial networks and public interest organizations during the proceeding.

“Unlicensed wireless broadband is dirt cheap to deploy because you don’t dig up streets or run hundreds of miles of wire or pay a billion dollars for a license in a spectrum auction,” said Ben Scott, Policy Director for Free Press (FP), a non-partisan advocacy group. “You can set up a system with free software and parts you can buy at any box store.” As a result, hundreds of volunteer organizations have sprung up around the country to provide free wireless broadband in communities from New York City to a federation of Indian tribes scattered over hundreds of square miles in Southern California. These volunteer organizations are called “community wireless networks” (CWNs). Free Press works to help CWNs mobilize and deploy systems in communities around the country.

Jim Snider, Senior Research Fellow for New America Foundation (NAF), sounded a cautionary note. “We won’t know for sure if this is a good thing until we see the details,” said Snider. “The exact balance struck between licensed and unlicensed advocates is not yet clear. If the first few people to set up systems can block new entrants, then we’re back to the old site-licensing model with its army of lawyers and lobbyists playing ‘king of the hill.’” New America Foundation is a Washington think-tank widely recognized as a leading expert on spectrum policy. Although the FCC voted to approve the Order today, it did not release a final text of the new rules. As a result, the details of how the new rules will work remain unknown.

The 3650-3700 MHz band is currently used for ground stations on the coasts and in the midwest communicating with satellites. For most of the country, the band is “dead air” with no activity. At the same time, more and more communities want to use unlicensed spectrum like “wifi” to provide internet services. For example, the City of Philadelphia has proposed creating a “wireless cloud” around its downtown and in inner city neighborhoods where residents can’t afford DSL. In rural areas, wireless often provides the best way to get broadband, because it costs too much for a phone or cable company to provide the service.

The FCC initially proposed opening the band to stationary “high power” base-stations using 25 watts of power, and mobile “low power” devices using less than 1 watt of power. But many of the proposed limitations to protect existing licensees would have made the cost of using the new spectrum prohibitive to CWNs. The proposed rules also would have favored high power users over low power users. Many CWNs – particularly in crowded cities – use low power “mesh” systems that go from antenna to antenna on nearby rooftops. By contrast, commercial users and rural CWNs prefer high power systems that can send signals for miles and can use a single large antenna to serve many customers, but such high power systems can interfere with low power mesh networks.

MAP, FP, and NAF worked hard to inform Commission staff about the needs of non-commercial networks. In the end, the FCC Order reflected a compromise between those favoring high power, users of low power mesh networks, and existing licensees demanding protection.

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