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Study Pans Low-Power Radio Rules  
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WASHINGTON -- An independent study suggests that a campaign by big broadcasters to limit low-power community radio stations had little technological justification. The study could open the door for Congress to ease restrictions it imposed on low-power radio. The broadcasting industry bitterly opposed the Federal Communications Commission's decision in 2000 to authorize a projected 1,000 low-power stations. Broadcasters said their full-power radio signals would suffer interference from the 100-watt radio stations and cause frustrated listeners to tune out.

Congress responded to the industry's fears by imposing tough interference standards on the tiny noncommercial stations just months after the FCC authorized them. But Congress might revisit that decision in light of the study and the changes in the political climate since the FCC's decision in June to grant broad deregulation of media-company ownership.

A growing bipartisan coalition of lawmakers fears the FCC deregulation will allow excess ownership concentration that will wrest control of the media from local communities. Supporters of low-power radio hope more lawmakers will see the community stations as part of the solution.

"I'm very hopeful Congress will be interested in the report," says Cheryl Leanza of the **Media Access Project**, a consumer group that supports low-power radio. "Now that legislators are educated about the state of media concentration, they are more likely to take action."

Responding to fast-paced corporate consolidation in the radio industry, former FCC Chairman William Kennard in January 2000 pushed the low-power radio program as a way to give communities a voice in local media. The program allows the establishment of

noncommercial educational stations with a modest investment and less red tape, largely because their 100-watt signals can only span a 3.5 mile radius.

The move infuriated commercial broadcasters and even noncommercial National Public Radio. Nine months after the FCC created the program, Rep. Michael Oxley (R, Ohio) won passage of a bill gutting the program by imposing interference standards that would protect full-power stations as far as three channels away on the radio dial.

The standards effectively killed 80% of the stations before they were launched. The bill also called on the FCC to commission an independent study of interference based on data from test stations and to make a recommendation to Congress based on the study.

The report by research firm Mitre Corp. said blanket third-adjacent-channel protections "should be waived." Nor is there need for a "formal listener-test program" or economic analysis that had been suggested, the study found.

"Perceptible interference caused during the tests . . . occurred too seldom, especially outside the immediate vicinity of the sites where the stations were operating, to warrant the additional expense that those follow-on activities would entail," the study concluded.

Rules could be written, based on an easily applied formula, to ensure adequate distance between low-power and full-power stations, the study said.

"It confirms what any independent engineers were saying," Ms. Leanza said. Interference "is not a problem. Unfortunately, the technical information [backing the restrictions] was contaminated by business and other objectives."

The National Association of Broadcasters is reviewing the study. Spokesman Dennis Wharton said the study doesn't clear low-power radio, noting instances where interference was found.

"We've always said any interference is bad interference for listeners," he said.

The study is being subjected to a period of public comment at the FCC, allowing the broadcasters' association, consumer groups and others an opportunity to respond. The FCC is expected to issue a recommendation to Congress at the end of the year.

Sen. John McCain last year introduced a bill easing the way for low-power stations, but the Arizona Republican hasn't focused on the issue this session, a spokeswoman said. Rep. Oxley is unlikely to take the lead in the radio dispute again, a member of his staff said.

Any bill easing the restrictions would have to go before Rep. Billy Tauzin, chairman of the House Commerce Committee. The Louisiana Republican voted for Rep. Oxley's bill; staffers were unfamiliar with the study and couldn't comment on it.

But even supporters of low-power radio have few illusions about its potential to affect what they see as loss of local control to media concentration.

Low-power radio "is an important effort to ameliorate the poor state of radio," Ms. Leanza says. "But it doesn't take the place of large commercial stations that try to better meet the need of citizens."

Radio-group owners dispute that consolidation results in loss of local control, arguing that programming and news decisions are still being made by local managers.

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