Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

February 8, 2008

The Honorable George W. Bush
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

At midnight on February 17, 2009, our nation will undergo a critical technological conversion when we transition to digital television (DTV). The benefits of the DTV transition are well-known, including more television programming with better picture and sound quality, and more spectrum for innovative and wide-reaching wireless services. One of the most important benefits will be using some of that spectrum to create a nationwide broadband public safety network for use by first responders.

Realizing these benefits depends on a successful transition, and for the transition to succeed, consumers need to be prepared for it. Beginning February 18, 2009, analog television sets that are not connected to a digital-to-analog converter box or a cable or satellite service will cease to function. Because television is the predominant medium through which Americans receive critical public safety information and is one of the chief conduits for news and political discourse, the most fundamental aspect of the DTV transition is ensuring that consumers are educated about it.

The burden of the DTV transition will fall predominantly on the poor, elderly, and minorities. In 2005, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that 21 million homes—nearly one in five of all television-equipped households—rely on free, over-the-air broadcasts for television service. Of these households, almost half have annual incomes of less than $30,000, one-third is headed by an individual over age 50, and one-third is headed by a native Spanish speaker. Clearly, those expected to be most affected by the transition will also be the most difficult to reach.

The federal budget for consumer education about the transition makes the task even more difficult. The amount of money set aside for the federal government's consumer outreach for the entire country is currently less than $8 million. By comparison, in 2003, the city of Berlin, Germany, spent almost $1 million to educate just 3 million consumers about a similar transition. It is imperative that our government do more.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the agency that oversees the nation's airwaves, has been working with affected industries to educate consumers and ensure that the technical aspects of the transition are occurring in a timely manner. The Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) has been tasked with implementing a program to distribute up to two $40 coupons per household to subsidize the cost of digital-to-analog converter boxes and to educate consumers about that effort. While these two agencies have made progress, GAO reports that much more remains to be done. Specifically, GAO found that it is unclear precisely who in the federal government is in charge of the transition.

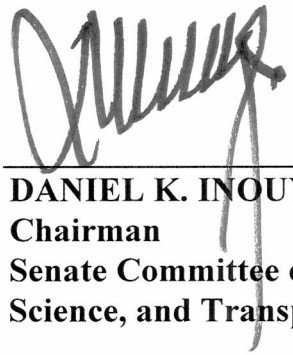
A coordinated federal effort to oversee the DTV transition is essential. We therefore strongly urge you to establish immediately a federal inter-agency taskforce to oversee the transition to digital television, with the FCC as the lead agency. The taskforce's primary focus would be on using the government's existing relationships with Americans to ensure a robust, wide-ranging, effective consumer education effort.

Different federal agencies have relationships with specific categories of constituents, which can be optimized to help publicize the transition. For example, the Department of Veterans Affairs could reach out to veterans, the Social Security Administration could inform senior citizens, the Bureau of Indian Affairs could educate Native American communities, the Federal Trade Commission could adapt consumer alert programs, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development could notify low-income families across the country. The government used a similar approach to prepare America successfully for the year 2000 transition. Your leadership in establishing such a taskforce, accompanied by strong Presidential oversight, would help ensure a smooth DTV transition.

The DTV transition is a government mandate that will affect all consumers, and it is incumbent on the government to use its resources to help educate and prepare all Americans for this potentially disruptive change in our broadcasting system. There are less than 500 hundred days remaining before the end of the DTV transition. If the transition is not successful, millions of Americans who rely solely on over-the-air broadcasts may be left in the dark. We therefore urge you to act expeditiously.

Sincerely,

JOHN D. DINGELL
Chairman
House Committee on Energy and Commerce



DANIEL K. INOUYE
Chairman
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

cc: The Honorable Joe Barton, Ranking Member
House Committee on Energy and Commerce

The Honorable Ted Stevens, Vice Chairman
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation