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Digital switch may not be a pretty picture

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Come Feb. 17, millions of televisions could go dark, possibly making the nation's monumental switch to digital TV the train wreck that many consumer advocates feared it could be.

In 2006, Congress mandated that TV stations stop broadcasting analog signals and switch to digital. Since then, federal and TV-industry efforts to prepare people for the February deadline haven't quite hit the mark. Nielsen Co. says an estimated 230,000 homes (about 7 percent) in the Chicago area were not ready for the switch - and just this week a federal fund to help people make the switch ran dry.

Desperate to spread the word, the feds even spent \$350,000 to decorate a race car with slogans about the switch. Aside from questions over whether that was the best use of \$350,000, the fact that the Nascar racer crashed twice in two months was perhaps symbolic of how things have gone.

The Citizens Utility Board has a fact sheet, at www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org, to clear up confusion about the switch. Here are the basics:

Most TVs should be fine - those with cable or satellite service and those with built-in digital tuners (generally, a TV built after 2004). You need to act if your TV uses "bunny ears" or antennas. But don't assume you need to buy a new TV. The time is ripe for retailers and cable companies to lure you into buying an expensive set or cable package you don't need. TVs not ready for digital simply need a converter box, which sells for \$40 to \$80 at retailers such as Target, Best Buy, CVS and Jewel-Osco.

The federal government does have a coupon program to help households buy the converters, but this week it hit a \$1.34 billion funding limit, forcing people onto a long waiting list and prompting officials to encourage people to buy a converter for at least one TV by the deadline. As of this week, more than 24 million households had requested more than 46 million coupons. Only some 18 million had been redeemed.

So why is the cable and broadcast industry so keen on the switch? To benefit consumers, says a federal agency.

True, digital TV can provide a beautiful picture and give us more viewing opportunities. Also, digital signals use less space than analog signals, opening up the airwaves for a wireless network to help police and fire departments in emergencies.

But there's also money to be made. Something tells us that "Big TV" is a bit preoccupied with serving a certain sector of the public - lucrative high-tech households. Meanwhile, people hit hardest by this change are the ones who can least afford it.

Think of grandparents on a fixed income who rely on TV for the weather report and emergency broadcasts. Maybe TV is their main connection to the world-and we're about to cut it off. Once more, people who could benefit the most from technology are in danger of being left in its dust.

Citizens Utility Board executive director David Kolata writes a column each month. To reach CUB, call (800) 669-5556 or e-mail info@citizensutilityboard.org.

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