

Tribal members get ready for digital TV

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Tribal member and Education Department employee Chris Bailey heads one of 13 million American households that watch free, over-the-air television.

Like the vast majority of others who do the same, he plans to get a converter box in anticipation of February's switchover from analog to digital signals.

"We're going to do that this weekend," Bailey said recently. "Eventually, we're going to get a new TV, but we're not going to get satellite or cable."

All 13 million households like Bailey's have to do something when the television switchover takes effect on Feb. 17.

Anyone living in the Grand Ronde area that currently watches TV using an antenna and does not subscribe to a cable or satellite service will need a converter box to continue receiving the new digital signal.

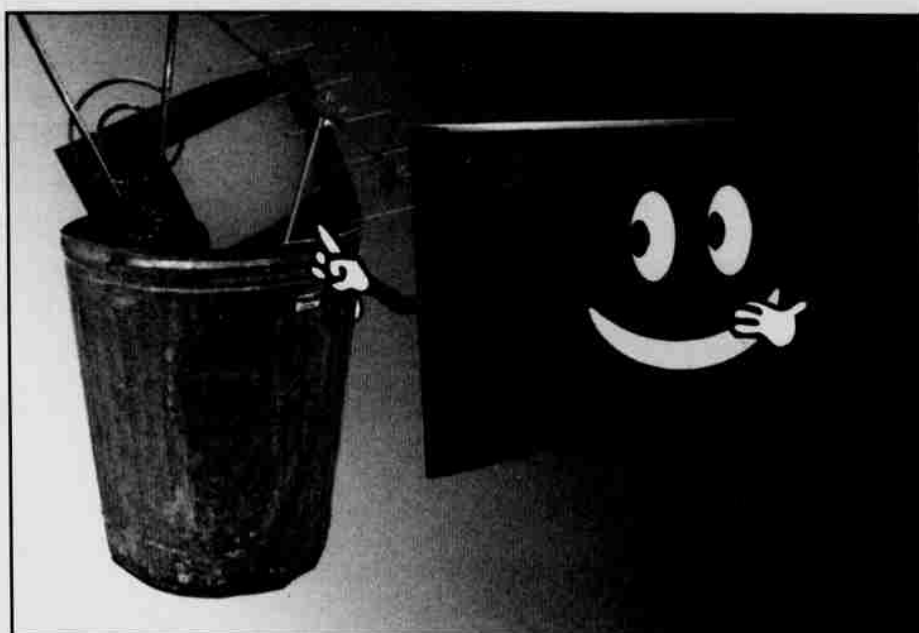
Options for those using an antenna include switching TV service to a cable or satellite company, buying a new digital signal television or purchasing a converter box for \$20 or less after redeeming a government-subsidized \$40 coupon. The converter box will allow the digital signal to work on older analog televisions.

Grand Ronde area residents whose television reception comes from a cable or satellite company, or a telephone company video service, do not have to do anything. Only people using antennae must do something if they want to continue watching TV.

To learn more about the coupon and apply, see the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's Web site at www.dtv2009.gov. Coupons are free, but expire after three months of issuance. McMinnville retailers BiMart, Wal-Mart and Radio Shack do not accept expired coupons.

The 2005 federal legislation allocated \$1.5 billion for the digital TV switchover, and money left over from expired coupons will be redistributed to others seeking coupons, according to the DTV 888 service listed on the coupons.

The federal coupon campaign provides up to two \$40 coupons for purchasing two converter boxes. They cannot be combined to pay for a single box.



Graphic created by George Valdez

The television switchover from analog to digital signals takes place on Feb. 17. Anyone in the Grand Ronde area not using a cable or satellite provider (right) to receive a signal will need a converter box to watch television after that day.

Coupons are granted on a first-come, first-serve basis until the money is depleted. The funds come from the \$19.6 billion that the federal government rose auctioning off the newly available spectrum of high-definition, digital channels.

Converter boxes are available at many electronics stores, including Best Buy, Circuit City, Kmart, Sears and Target, and have been selling for \$40 to \$70.

Most believe better pictures and sound, and maybe even better reception, are advantages to the digital signal switchover.

Digital TV has several advantages. Digital channels take up less bandwidth, allowing broadcasters to provide more digital channels, high-definition service, as well as non-television services, including multimedia or interactivity. Digital TV also allows special services, such as multi-plexing (more than one program on the same channel), electronic program guides and additional languages, spoken or subtitled.



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

However, there are disadvantages accompanying digital service. Converter boxes will make some existing analog equipment less functional.

For example, television remotes will no longer change channels because that function will instead be handled by the converter box remote. Similarly, video recorders for analog signals, including both tape-based VCRs and hard-drive-based DVRs, will not be able to select channels, limiting the ability to automatically record programs with a timer or based on downloaded program information.

In addition, older handheld, portable televisions, which rely primarily on over-the-air signals and batteries, will be impractical since the converter boxes are neither portable nor powered with batteries.

Converter boxes also have a peculiar problem: unless users manually change settings from show to show, either the picture from many stations won't fill the screen or it will be so big that parts of the picture will be cut off by the edges of the screen.

Digital signals make picture and sound much clearer, or as Tribal member Hope Lafferty, who watches via satellite, says, "I don't like seeing the flaws of newscasters so up-close and personal. And I only watch the news. It is added stress for them as well, I'm sure, as more and more opt for Botox and facelifts. It is more obvious who has gotten

'work' done thanks to digital TV. And I'm totally serious.

"Other than that, the pixels are good and better, and it makes for a pleasant viewing experience due to more detail."

Tribal Elder Lillian Engel wondered if a digital signal would be picked up more easily in rural areas by an antenna with a converter box than the analog signal is at present.

"We have subscribed to satellite service because our reception stinks with an antenna," Engel said. "But since the cost of satellite subscription is ever increasing, I was wondering if there would be any improvement in the reception once the signal being sent is digital rather than analog."

Unfortunately, according to Oregon Public Broadcasting's Transition Coordinator Tom Haydon, the answer to that depends on location.

"As a general rule," Haydon said, "yes, reception will be better, but there are some exceptions. Every location is different based on how the signal goes through the air."

In short, viewers won't know until after they buy the converter box and find out.

At Spirit Mountain Lodge, the TV signal for guest room TV sets is provided by a cable provider, said IT Manager Steve Stewart.

He said he doubts many residents living in the Grand Ronde area still using an antenna to watch TV are getting good reception because of the area's distance from Portland and Salem, as well as the interference caused by living in a valley.

The pay-TV industry expects benefits from the switchover. Because of the difficulty of putting together all the aspects of the program, Comcast Chief Operating Officer Steve Burke told a trade meeting this summer that the February transition will prove to be a growth opportunity for all pay-TV providers.

And one analyst, Craig Moffett of Sanford Bernstein, recently concluded, "The digital TV transition could represent a once-in-a-generation catalyst for cable stocks."

The state's Department of Environmental Quality has weighed in on another aspect of the switchover: What happens to old televisions when customers update to a newer television not needing a converter box?

The DEQ information sheet "Don't Toss That TV! What to Do With Your Old TV Set" offers three answers: Keep the old TV as a second TV for games, videos and DVDs; give your old TV to a friend or donate it to a secondhand store; and recycle it.

Starting in 2009, Oregonians can recycle their old TVs, as well as desktop and portable computers and monitors, free through the DEQ. Every county and all cities with more than 10,000 residents will have a drop site.

Check the DEQ Web site at www.deq.state.or.us/lq/ecycle/index.htm, or call DEQ at 503-229-5830 for more information.

Tribal member and Tribal Information Systems Audio/Video Network Technician Wendell Olson contributed to the research for this article. ■

2009 Tribal Marketplace dates

- Jan. 3 & 4
- Feb. 7 & 8
- March 7 & 8
- April 4 & 5
- May 2 & 3
- June 6 & 7
- July 4 & 5
(Possibly 7/3 for the three-day holiday weekend)
- Aug. 1 & 2
- Sept. 5 & 6

Dates subject to change due to conflicting Tribal or SMC events. Located across from Cedar Plank Buffet.