

Digital Television Upgrade Promises New Public Service for Oregon

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Oregon Public Broadcasting began transmitting high-definition television programs to viewers in Central Oregon last week with the completion of the installation of a new digital antenna for KOAB-DT/channel 11 in Bend. The new antenna atop Awbrey Butte brings digital television to a rapidly growing Oregon community and completes the upgrade of OPB's five digital transmitters. But the signal offers much more than just a better picture for Central Oregon residents.

OPB's new digital capability also holds the promise of a sophisticated emergency communications network that could serve even the most remote corners of the state.

Unlike the analog signal beamed to a standard television set, digital TV signals can transmit multiple streams of data and pictures simultaneously. While viewers with digital sets watch OPB's regular programming in downtown Bend, for example, crews battling a forest fire in the Cascades could receive real-time satellite imagery and data on the fire on the same broadcast signal.

"OPB's all-digital signal could be the backbone of a state-of-the-art emergency system," said OPB President Steve Bass. "We have the ability to provide police, firefighters and emergency relief crews with the information they need sent directly to cell phones, computers and specialized receivers in the field."

The technology - called "datacasting" - is already in use in some other cities and states. Bass is among those who tested the technology for emergency services last year while still at Nashville Public Television in Tennessee.

"We still have a ways to go here in Oregon," Bass added.

With completion of the installation of the digital antenna in Bend, all of OPB's large transmitters now carry the digital signal to the most-populated parts of Oregon. However much of the state is served by smaller "translators" that broadcast in areas where mountains or coastlines block the larger transmitter's signals. These translators have yet to be converted to digital.

A federal government mandate requiring OPB and all other broadcasters nationwide to turn off the analog television system in February 2009 provides a dilemma: Either OPB's network of 41 translators must be converted to digital operation or they must be shut off. The mandate puts viewers in large parts of Oregon - east of the Cascades and along the coast, for example - at risk of losing their television service altogether.

"Those are precisely the parts of Oregon that stand to benefit the most from OPB's digital signal," said Oregon Senator Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose. "OPB alone has the ability to offer equal access to both urban and rural Oregon with high-quality arts and education programs and to serve emergency responders as well," she said.

Bass estimates the digital translator upgrade will cost \$5.5 million. "It's a small price for an exponential increase in possible services all across the state," he said. "As the state's primary operation center for the Emergency Alert and Amber Alert systems, the digital conversion of OPB's translator network will provide unparalleled opportunities to enhance the safety of Oregon's citizens. Just the potential to develop a tsunami alert system on the Oregon coast makes the investment look worthwhile to property owners there," Bass said.

"Through OPB, people throughout the state have equal access to information and educational opportunities," said Oregon Representative Greg Smith, R-Heppner. "OPB now has the potential to make communities around Oregon safer and better prepared."

A State of Oregon appropriation in 2001 and contributions from individuals, foundations and corporations provided the \$22 million required to meet the federal requirement to convert OPB's major transmitters. To date, no funding has been secured for the translator upgrades.

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