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TO: Municipal and County Elected Officials
Municipal Budget Officials
Public Safety Officials
Communications Directors & Supervisors

FROM: Gloria J. Broeker
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SUBJECT: Updates to the FCC Narrowbanding Mandate Deadline

I expect that you are aware of the deadlines imposed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to upgrade two-way radio equipment that may be in use by your public safety agencies, public works departments and even school district. Per the FCC, after January 1, 2013 you will no longer be permitted to use what is known as wideband frequencies for radio communications. Daily fines may be assessed on wideband users after that date. Additionally, if you neglect to file a modification to your license the FCC will issue narrowband licenses on your former frequencies.

Hopefully, the previous paragraph has gotten your attention if you have not yet taken any action to upgrade your FCC licenses and equipment to operate with narrowband frequencies. This issue did not emerge overnight; in 1995 the FCC adopted a rule change that mandated narrowbanding for land mobile radios operating in the 150 MHz to 512 MHz frequency bands. Because of requirements contained in the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012, recently passed by Congress, the FCC released an order (DA 12-642) on April 26, 2012 waiving the narrowbanding requirement for licensees operating in the 470-512 MHz, referred to as T-Band. The FCC emphasizes that the waiver applies only to T-Band licensees in the 470-512 MHz band, frequencies in the 150-174 MHz and 421-470 MHz bands must meet the narrowbanding deadline. Agencies operating in the T-Band should visit the FCC website for precise details.

Much of Public Safety and Public Service users operate in these bands. For well over 10 years the FCC has evaluated the benefits of reducing the bandwidth being used in those bands to allow more users to operate in the same amount of spectrum. The FCC has determined that it could cut the licensed bandwidth in half and ultimately to one quarter of the currently used bandwidth and still maintain adequate communications. This would allow two times or even four times the number of users in the existing spectrum. The technology is mature for the two for one split and is evolving for the four for one split. There is no set date for the four for one split.

Unfortunately this upgrade will require a modification of your license and a replacement of all equipment that is not capable of operating in the narrowband mode. Equipment in the Very High Frequency (VHF) band currently operating with a bandwidth of 15 KHz must operate at 7.5 KHz and at Ultra High Frequencies (UHF) currently operating with a bandwidth of 25 KHz must operate at 12.5 KHz of bandwidth or demonstrate equivalent efficiencies in the use of the bandwidth to continue operation.

In 2004, the FCC issued a report and order setting out the above listed deadlines; essentially no equipment would be type accepted after January 1, 2011 and no wideband equipment can be used after January 1, 2013. For the most part, equipment purchased after 1997 is capable of narrowband operation with a relatively modest firmware upgrade. Older equipment may have to be replaced. There may be some coverage issues due to the slightly reduced coverage capabilities of narrowband radios and some VHF radios may not be able to program on every 7.5 KHz spaced frequency. Your staff should inventory all of your equipment currently being used and check with your vendor as to the viability of the radios, this mandate also applies to pagers in use by many volunteer Fire & EMS agencies. Some vendors have been trying to gain advantage from this upgrade by advising that replacements are necessary when firmware upgrades can do the job. If in doubt check with more than one vendor or visit the manufacturer's website for verification.

It is extremely unlikely the FCC will delay the implementation of the regulation. The order has been published for nearly eight years. The FCC has indicated that adequate time has been granted to amortize the cost of radio equipment and should not present a hardship. Remember in most cases only equipment over 10 years old will have to be replaced. Many municipalities mistakenly believed that this upgrade applied only to Public Safety users. In fact it applies to all users in the above listed bands. This includes municipal utilities, school districts as well as some business users.

If you have not done so, the time is now to develop a plan to phase in the implementation of this regulation. It may be difficult or impossible to change out your equipment in the last quarter of 2012. Failing to meet the deadline will result in heavy fines and the loss of your valuable frequencies.

This letter omitted many of the technicalities involved in the upgrade but has covered the essentials of how the narrowband upgrade will impact your operation. In the event you have any questions on this issue please visit the Office of Emergency Telecommunications Services (OETS) website at <http://www.nj.gov/911/p25> or contact Craig Reiner, OETS Director, at P25Info@oit.state.nj.us.