

# The Party Crashers

These days getting the United States, Russia, China, and Europe to agree on a common policy seems to be an increasingly rare event.

That's why the long-standing comity among system operators in the GNSS sphere is particularly notable and welcome. "Interoperable and compatible" is the first principle espoused by the four nations under the aegis of the International Committee on GNSS.

Another principle particularly dear to U.S. policymakers is ensuring a "level playing field" that avoids preferential treatment for one's own system so as to disadvantage the use of other GNSSes within a nation's boundaries.

So, the latest incursion of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) into GNSS affairs is more than annoying; it's potentially ruinous for U.S. interests in both the commercial and diplomatic domains.

In recent testimony to the board that advises the National Space-Based Positioning, Navigation, and Timing Executive Committee that oversee GPS policy, a high-ranking official from the FCC Office of Engineering and Technology said that foreign GNSS systems will need to obtain authorization to operate legally in the United States. Further, he suggested that imported GNSS products may need to be regulated and domestic GNSS products, certified as meeting FCC standards.

Dee Ann Divis provides the details in this issue's Washington View — but they aren't pretty and plenty of ambiguities have arisen.

The FCC, an agency established and overseen by Congress, has a checkered past in GNSS affairs. It appeared to become aware of the technology only in 1996 after issuing its first notice of proposed rulemaking for enhanced 911 (E911), which provides automatic position reporting for emergency callers using mobile phones. Even then,

the benefit of GNSS had to be thrust upon the agency by industry — FCC engineers had helped shape the policy with the assumption that less precise network-based techniques would be used for positioning.

After GNSS and cell phone manufacturers demonstrated the superior accuracy of GPS and its utility in remote areas where cell towers were few and far between, the agency adopted a "technology-agnostic" stance but still set a double standard for network-based and GNSS-based solutions.

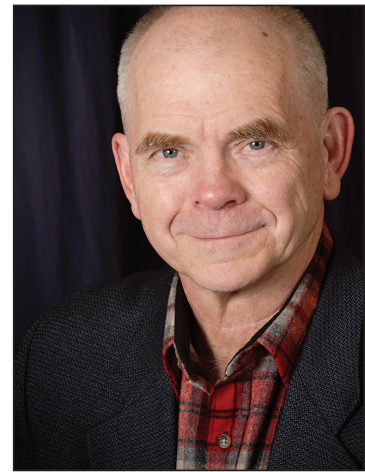
The FCC next showed up in the early 2000s as advocates of ultrawideband (UWB) sought to cut a swath through GNSS frequencies. Only after extensive tests showed the potentially devastating effects on GPS did the agency modify the UWB proposal and design to protect the bands.

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That exercise foreshadowed the recent experience with LightSquared's wireless broadband initiative, which the FCC only grudgingly — and still not completely — squashed.

From the outside (and through the eyes of an admittedly partisan GNSS supporter), these persistent missteps of the FCC seem to arise from a lack of appreciation of the positioning technology — both in how it works differently from two-way voice and data services and in its free access to users.

Technically, the minutely powered GNSS transmissions are whispers in a room full of partygoers. In a Washington, D.C., environment where billion-dollar spectrum auctions by lots of attention and favors, a free service like



GPS gets treated like a panhandler on the street corner.

What is to be done in this situation?

First, the agency needs to make its intentions and plans clear and unambiguous. If they include authorization of foreign GNSS services' operation in the United States, that should be granted to any compatible system without delay. Then, if import controls and receiver standards are at issue, those should be dealt with on the same basis as GPS.

Apparently, because of the agency's relative autonomy, even the president — who hasn't noticeably appreciated GPS much more than the FCC — can only *request* waivers of the authorization requirement. But the White House appoints the agency's commissioners; so, it should be able to persuade them to do the right thing, if it comes down to that.

There's quite a party going on with GNSS these days. The FCC would play better as an invited guest than in its current guise as a gate crasher.

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