

LightSquared: GPS interference issues all but solved

By Eliza Krigman

6/30/11 12:56 PM EDT

LightSquared claimed in a [new report](#) filed to the FCC Thursday it has found a solution to the interference issues that have hamstrung the company's plans to build a wholesale nationwide wireless network.

The company said that its revised plans would resolve 99.5 percent of interference with GPS devices — and all interference with GPS-enabled phones. Some 300 million phones have GPS capability.

LightSquared blamed the GPS industry for allowing the interference issue to surface in the first place — and then for being unwilling to help find an answer.

“This is a problem that the GPS industry could have avoided by equipping their devices over the last several years with filters that cost as little as five cents each,” the company said in a news release.

LightSquared said that testing results it submitted to the FCC show unequivocally that “the interference is caused by the GPS device manufacturer's decision over the last eight years to design products that depend on using spectrum assigned to other FCC licenses.”

The GPS industry dismissed those claims.

“The LightSquared proposal could best be described as public relations pabulum,” Dale Leibach, a representative for a coalition of GPS companies opposing LightSquared plans. “Their proposal is unworkable. They need to move to other spectrum that won't cause massive disruption of GPS.”

The company, which hopes to be the nation's first wholesale-only wireless broadband network, also faces stiff political opposition on the Hill and concerns among a variety of federal agencies including the Defense Department and the Federal Aviation Administration.

Recently the House Appropriations Committee passed a measure that would prevent the FCC from allowing LightSquared to move forward by attaching restrictions to a funding bill.

The FCC, which has publicly defended LightSquared, offered a delicately balanced statement of support.

“The commission appreciates the hard work the working group has put into producing this report,” agency spokesman Neil Grace said. “The FCC has a long-standing record of resolving interference disputes based on engineering data.”

FCC staff will “now conduct a thorough and expeditious review of the report,” he added.

FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski has said that the agency will only allow LightSquared to proceed if the disruption issues are resolved. At the same time, the skyrocketing demand for scarce public airwaves means that the country “cannot afford to let spectrum go underutilized,” Grace said.

“America's economic growth and global competitiveness are on the line,” he said.

While LightSquared has been left to defend its business plans on its own for the most part, a few others in the technology community have started to weigh in on its behalf.

In the wake of the report, the Computer and Communications Industry Association called on the FCC to broker a solution.

“It is in the public interest for the FCC to insist the GPS community make a good faith effort to work together with stakeholder government agencies and LightSquared toward a compromise that’s acceptable to all,” CCIA said in a news release. “That may involve shifts in frequency use, time horizons and/or phasing out old equipment.”

Harold Feld, legal director of Public Knowledge, recently chimed in with a blog defending the wholesale-broadband company. “The LightSquared folks are right about how the GPS guys knew this day would come and conveniently chose to do nothing,” Feld wrote.

But the cooperation of federal agencies may be an even more important factor for LightSquared, said Jeff Silva, a telecommunications analyst with Medley Global Advisors.

“The key stakeholders that could either push this toward a resolution in the near term or keep this an obstacle as the way it is, are the Department of Defense and other federal agencies,” Silva said.

The Defense Department did not respond to an immediate request for comment.