

# GPS Coalition Fights To Save Their Satellite-Based Signals



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**S**ome of the biggest names in agriculture are duking it out over who can use which spectrums of the airwaves.

At issue is a recent action by the the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to allow a new, integrated wire-

less broadband and satellite network, called LightSquared, that would deploy 40,000 ground-based radio signals stations in the U.S.

LightSquared plans to transmit ground-based radio signals that would be one billion or more times more powerful as those received on earth than GPS's low-powered satellite-based signals. Critics say it could potentially cause severe interference, impacting millions of Global Positioning System receivers – including those used by the federal agencies, state and local governments, first responders, airlines, mariners, civil engineering, construction and surveying, agriculture, and everyday consumers in their cars and on handheld devices.

They've formed the Coalition to save Our GPS to highlight the problems and lobby against FCC approval. Members include equipment companies like AGCO, Deere & Co., Caterpillar and Trimble, along with the Agricultural Retailers Association, Growmark, and the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, and U.S. Rice Federation.

Not to be outdone, LightSquared launched the creation of the "Empower Rural America Initiative" last week, led by an advisory board that includes former Senator Byron Dorgan of North Dakota and former Representatives George Nethercutt of Washington and Charlie Stenholm of Texas. Among other things, the group will partner with LightSquared to make sure device filters and other approaches are developed that will resolve any GPS issues related to precision agriculture and other areas, the company said in announcing the board.

## FCC questions

But the debate isn't likely to go away anytime soon. Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, recently jumped into the debate, asking why the FCC has not been more forthcoming with an explanation about LightSquared and the FCC's process.

"If anything, the shadows around the LightSquared project should have led the Federal Communications Commission to proceed with caution rather than step on the gas," Grassley said. "The opposite happened and the FCC needs to be held accountable. The public spectrum is limited, and it's a valuable asset that the FCC is responsible for protecting."

In January, the FCC gave LightSquared approval to build the broadband and satellite system, but the agency said it would not let the company turn on the network until GPS interference problems are resolved. The agency required LightSquared, GPS equipment makers and GPS users to establish a working group to study the matter. That group recently filed its report with the commission, with LightSquared insisting that the interference problems are fixable.

However, GPS equipment makers, and companies and government agencies that rely on GPS technology, warn that the planned network would jam their systems because LightSquared would use airwaves close to those already set aside for GPS.

"The working group test results showed that use of this portion of the MSS band caused overwhelming interference to every category of the 500 million GPS receivers in use in the United States, from those used by airplanes, police vehicles and ambulances to everyday consumer cell phones and personal navigational devices," according to the Coalition to Save our GPS.

"The use of GPS technology is vital to thousands of people who make their living with agricultural and construction equipment. It is not acceptable to allow interference to these important industries when there is no practical solution to mitigate the problem of interference," Barry Schaffter, senior vice president and chief information officer at Deere and Company, a coalition member, said in a recent statement.

With the working group report complete, the FCC will now seek public comments until July 30. The FCC said it will review the report, adding that it has "a long-standing record of resolving interference disputes."

## More questions asked

In a July 5 letter, Sen. Grassley pointedly asked FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski to comply with his request for information about LightSquared founder, billionaire Phillip Falcone, and his firm, Harbinger Capital Partners.

"In my initial letter I noted that Mr. Phillip Falcone is being investigated by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) for obtaining a \$113 million loan from his hedge fund, Harbinger Capital, to pay his taxes, without the consent of his investors," Grassley wrote. "Since then, it has come to light that Mr. Falcone and his firm are also the subject of additional SEC investigations that include allegations of 'market manipulation' and violations of the 'short sale rule' involving three separate stocks. I requested a response by May 10, 2011. On May 31, 2011, over one month after my initial request, you responded with a letter that did not respond to any of my questions and offered a general defense of the FCC's expedited procedure regarding LightSquared."

Grassley's comments come after several other lawmakers have raised "red flags" about Falcone's political contributions and connections with President Barack Obama and key Democrats. Earlier this year, GOP critics pointed to large donations to Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, made shortly after Falcone visited the White House, that they say appeared to be related to the FCC's fast track approval of Harbinger's acquisition of a company called SkyTerra, which later became LightSquared. In 2007, when the New York Times reported then Sen. Barack Obama's investment in SkyTerra, he claimed he knew nothing about the stock, and said he lost money when it was sold. Δ

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