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## **Pai: Time to open up vital spectrum for Wi-Fi use**

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Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Ajit Pai made a renewed call for opening up an unused band of spectrum for internet use at the Wi-Fi World Congress this week.

Pai said “the time has come for the FCC to take a fresh look at the (5.9 GHz) band” during the event in Tysons Corner, Virginia.

“We should open up a rulemaking proceeding, seek comment on various proposals for the band’s future, and use the record that we compile to make a final decision on how the band should be allocated,” he said.

In 1999, the FCC reallocated 75 megahertz of spectrum in this band for a service called Dedicated Short Range Communications (DSRC). That technology was designed to allow car-to-car communications and help prevent accidents.

But nearly two decades later that technology is woefully underused and many automobile manufacturers have adopted alternative technologies such as Cellular V2X.

Despite this, the Department of Transportation, under President Barack Obama, issued a proposed rule in 2016 that would have required the technology in all light vehicles sold in the United States by 2023. A Cato Institute report estimated the move would cost carmakers \$200 billion by 2060, and tack on about \$300 to the average price of a car for consumers.

Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao put a halt to the plan after her appointment by President Donald Trump.

The concept of using that 5.9 GHz spectrum elsewhere isn’t a partisan issue. FCC commissioners Jessica Rosenworcel, a Democrat, and Michael O’Rielly, a Republican, issued a joint statement in 2016 praising a move to allow the FCC to conduct tests to prove that the spectrum can be shared without causing interference with safety signals. They noted that while improving automobile safety is a laudable goal, there have been enormous changes in technology since the 5.9 GHz spectrum was set aside for DSRC.

Rosenworcel and O’Rielly pointed out that technological advances have reduced the potential for interference and enabled spectrum sharing, allowing the commission to explore unlicensed opportunities in this band without causing harmful interference to DSRC safety functions.

Pai told attendees of the congress that one idea would allow for sharing between unlicensed devices and automotive communications technologies in the band.

“We could split the band, with the lower 45 MHz allocated exclusively for unlicensed and the upper 30 MHz allocated exclusively for vehicle-to-vehicle technologies,” he said. “Or we could allocate the entire 75 MHz band exclusively for unlicensed use.”

Pai pointed to a Rand Corporation study that found opening up 5.9 GHz for Wi-Fi use could add between \$60 billion and \$105 billion annually to the nation’s gross domestic product.

He said it was time to stop “kicking this can down the road.”

“This valuable mid-band spectrum is largely lying fallow, and it has been so for two decades now – just as the internet has gone from dial-up modems to gigabit Wi-Fi,” Pai said. “Given this, inertia isn’t a responsible thing for policymakers to indulge. It is time to launch a comprehensive review of the future of the 5.9 GHz band, make a sober assessment of the facts, and then make a timely decision on the best way forward.”

Phil Kerpen of free-market oriented American Commitment said that with the rapid growth of 5G and sensor-based technologies to aid in the development of autonomous cars it’s possible no spectrum will be needed for vehicle safety.

“Nonetheless, the FCC could potentially reserve a portion of the 5.9 GHz band in which automotive uses would be prioritized, or possibly designate another suitable band of spectrum for automotive use to satisfy Department of Transportation concerns and fully close the book on the Obama’s administration’s misguided approach,” he wrote in a blog post.

But he added that the FCC shouldn’t wait any longer to act.

“The country’s nearly insatiable demand for Wi-Fi in our homes, offices, and just about everywhere else should be met by opening the best spectrum available, rather than waiting because of a talking car law passed 20 years ago for a technology that never really worked,” Kerpen wrote.