

ALERT

FCC Kicks Off Comment Period on Sports Broadcast Marketplace

March 3, 2026

In a year highlighted by major sporting events like the Winter Olympics and the World Cup, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is coming off the bench and entering the sports broadcasting arena.

On February 25, 2026, the FCC's Media Bureau issued a Public Notice seeking comment on current and emerging trends in the distribution of live sports programming and, in particular, the effects of those trends on local television broadcast stations and consumers. Comments in the proceeding are due on March 27, 2026, with reply comments due April 13, 2026.

Background

The Public Notice recounts the early history of live sports as a driver for broadcast television, from NBC's experimental telecast of a college baseball game at the 1939 World's Fair to the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961, which allowed the major professional sports leagues to sell their teams' TV broadcast rights as a package to the major television networks. The notice goes on to note the skyrocketing value of sports rights fees today, as well as the availability of college and professional sports on a variety of non-broadcast platforms including national cable networks and direct-to-consumer streaming services.

The Commission emphasizes that despite this trend, "sports remain inherently local," with viewers turning to their local broadcasters for local sports team coverage just as they do for local news, weather, and emergency information. The Public Notice states that given this "nexus between sports programming and the local media

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marketplace – as well as the FCC’s ongoing work to support local news and reporting – we believe it is important for us to evaluate the sports media landscape and understand how changes have impacted consumers and broadcasters.”

Request for Comment

Amid this connection between local media and sports programming, the FCC seeks comment on several questions, including:

- **Sports Media Marketplace Changes:** How have recent developments affected broadcasters’ ability to obtain sports programming media rights? How have marketplace changes affected viewers’ ability to watch nationally televised and local sports? What about costs for consumers? Additionally, are sports media rights deals between local TV broadcasters and local sports teams prevalent? If so, what are their terms and conditions?
- **Non-Broadcast Distribution:** Do professional or collegiate sports require streaming platforms to syndicate or simulcast games over broadcast TV stations in competitor team markets? What are the differences between games distributed on linear broadcast services and streaming platforms?
- **TV Broadcaster Public Interest Obligations and the Commission’s Role:** Do sports media rights contracts conflict with TV broadcasters’ public interest obligations? Do local broadcast stations face challenges in airing other local sports programming, including high school sports? What is the FCC’s role, and how can the agency ensure that any broadcast licensee obligations are fulfilled? Should upcoming significant sports rights deal renewals factor into the Commission’s analysis?

Additionally, the FCC welcomes comment on any other topics that could facilitate its understanding of the modern sports media landscape, Commission legal authority, and ways to preserve viewers’ access to free over-the-air broadcast TV.

Wiley’s Media Practice has a deep bench of attorneys with extensive experience advocating for broadcasters and their interests before the Commission. If you have any questions or would like to file comments, please contact one of the attorneys listed on this alert or the Wiley attorney who routinely handles your FCC matters.