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Top News

Knapp Exit Leaves Hole at FCC, Could Complicate Spectrum Fights	2
Expected FCC SCOTUS Appeal Not Foregone Conclusion	3
Senate Commerce Eyes Solutions to Improve 5G Workforce Training	5
<..... C U T	>

Top News

OET Retiree 'Indispensable'

Knapp Exit Leaves Hole at FCC, Could Complicate Spectrum Fights

Julius Knapp's recent retirement as Office of Engineering and Technology chief could add a new wrinkle to a complicated spectrum landscape at the FCC, officials said. Knapp had led OET since 2006, under four chairmen. He was widely respected within and outside the agency. Officials told us the FCC has faced wide pushback from other federal agencies on recent spectrum initiatives, but Knapp added stability that's now missing. Another FCC veteran, Deputy Chief Ron Repasi, replaced him on an acting basis (see [1912120045](#)).

Knapp was dedicated and indispensable, said Paul Kolodzy, consultant and former FCC spectrum policy adviser. "The erosion of technical personnel and the lack of urgency by the commission in finding means to boost the talent pool has been a steady and consistent drain," Kolodzy told us. The drain means "relying almost exclusively on industry to provide the technical input that is generally, if not exclusively, focused on enabling business plans over long range national needs. Julie's dedication filled that gap. He will be missed."

Knapp left "enormous shoes to fill," said Fletcher Heald's Francisco Montero. "Not since Dale Hatfield," who retired in 2000, "has an OET director exercised such influence on spectrum policy and the telecommunications industry." Knapp "was broadly respected by industry players who can sometimes be at each other's throat," Montero said.

At times, “mutual respect for Julie Knapp was the one and only thing they could all agree on,” Montero said: “That uniquely placed him in a position to mediate and resolve impasses centered on spectrum policy which might otherwise have bogged down forward momentum. With Knapp gone, the FCC and industry will be looking to see whether his permanent successor can fill the vacuum left behind.” There’s “an ever-growing pool of players battling over spectrum,” the lawyer noted.

DS Law’s David Siddall said Knapp added stability at OET. “Intragovernmental spectrum negotiations involve many individuals and multiple years of back-and-forth, so any negative effect will take some time to become apparent,” he said. To avoid problems, FCC Chairman Ajit Pai should name a permanent replacement as soon as possible, someone with “a strong background in wireless spectrum ... and current spectrum technologies” with “superior negotiating skill and judgment,” said Siddall, a former FCC spectrum policy chief.

“Knowledge and judgment are required for success, and this is where Julie was exceptional,” Siddall said: “But to be the most effective, even with all the right skills, one has to be permanently appointed to the position, otherwise it can devolve into a waiting game.” Repasi is “very capable and respected,” but “acting” status “can undercut effectiveness,” he said.

“No one is indispensable, but if one were, it would be Julie Knapp,” said Mark Crosby, Enterprise Wireless Alliance president. “Maybe there is another ‘Julie’ in waiting. Until that person is identified, and has the technical and political expertise ... it might be a rough ride for a while at the commission,” Crosby said.

“Anytime you have a transition like this, it’s going to hold things up,” said Harold Feld, senior vice president at Public Knowledge. “That alone would be a hiccup” and probably slowed work on some wireless items, he said. Knapp “had enormous credibility on the Hill and that provided those who don’t trust the FCC ... confidence about the FCC’s technical analysis,” Feld said. When Knapp went to Capitol Hill and briefed Congress on interference issues, “they believed him even if they didn’t understand him,” the PK lawyer said: “That was an enormous asset and that’s now gone and it’s gone at a time that’s particularly fractious in terms of spectrum policy.”

Commissioner Mike O’Rielly downplayed concerns during a Tuesday news conference. “Julie’s team is still in place,” he said. “Ron will do a great job I’m sure. ... I don’t think great change is in the works and that’s a good thing.” The FCC didn’t comment.

Alex Roytblat, Wi-Fi Alliance senior director-regulatory affairs, worked with Knapp for a while at the FCC, he said. “Julie has built a high-caliber team of experts who will maintain FCC’s leadership in managing spectrum resources.” — *Howard Buskirk*