CableLabs greenlights first multi-stream CableCARD
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CedMagazine.com - March 31, 2006

A multi-stream CableCARD from Scientific Atlanta has become the first such device to win qualification from CableLabs.

The milestone qualification occurred on March 22, 2006, according to a filing made Thursday by the National Cable & Telecommunications Association (NCTA) to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

CableLabs qualification was awarded to the 1.0.2.4 version of SA's M-Card, a company spokesperson said.

The multi-stream CableCARD, also known as the "M-Card," is designed to operate in a single-stream manner with single stream devices (such as unidirectional Plug & Play television sets) or in multi-stream mode when combined with two-way devices. The latter combination will enable future two-way Plug & Play, set-top-free TVs to support video-on-demand and other interactive cable services and applications.

In the filing, NCTA also noted that a preliminary multi-stream test tool prototype, the HPNx Pro, was submitted to CableLabs. The device, expected to become available in mid-2006, "greatly facilitates the work needed by a CE manufacturer to install a multi-stream interface on a retail device." SCM Microsystems and Digital Keystone launched the HPNx test platform back in 2003.

The filing also noted that the six largest U.S. MSOs (Comcast Corp.; Time Warner Cable, Cox Communications, Charter Communications, Adelphia Communications and Cablevision Systems Corp.) had together deployed more than 126,000 CableCARDs as of Feb. 28, 2006. Those MSOs represent more than 80 percent of all U.S. cable subs.

When the next four largest MSOs (Bright House Networks, Mediacom Communications, Insight Communications and Cable One Inc.) are calculated into that total, the number of CableCARDs deployed rises to more than 141,000, the filing noted.

Although cable operators continue to deploy and support the CableCARD - a removable conditional access device that authorizes customers to receive video programming and premium cable video services - the industry is also pushing ahead with the Downloadable Conditional Access (DCAS) project.

The U.S. cable industry hopes DCAS, which will enlist a secure micro to transfer the conditional access system and encryption keys, will gain favor with the FCC as a long-term replacement of the more expensive and less elegant CableCARD approach.