

Distant Network Services (“Local Channels”) for Boaters

Many boat owners take their adventures to several different ports, traveling to see friends and family, checking out new fishing grounds, or just discovering new places. If you’re one of these boaters, you may also enjoy having satellite TV onboard for relaxing, catching the big game, or staying entertained during less-than-perfect weather. But have you ever wondered why you can’t watch certain channels when you cruise away from your home port? Lots of TracVision® owners have asked us about that, so KVH is giving you the scoop on why this happens and what you can do about it.

What is the SHVIA law, and why does it prevent me from watching my local channels?

SHVIA stands for Satellite Home Viewer Improvement Act, which became law in 1999. This law addresses the local programming issue for mobile users in land vehicles. The SHVIA allows owners of RVs or commercial trucks to apply for a waiver that allows them to receive distant network broadcasts. Unfortunately, this statute does not include maritime vessels, so boaters are not eligible for the waiver.

Is there anything I can do to change this?

The wording in this law that defines which vehicles are eligible for a waiver will have to change if boaters are to be able to take advantage of it. Right now, the only way to make that happen is for boaters to ask their senators and congressional representatives to help make this change. Please see the reverse side of this document for an example of a letter that you can send to your local representative. You can find your senators’ and representatives’ contact information on the “Contact Government” tab at www.usa.gov.

Q&A:

Why can’t I watch all my favorite channels once I cruise a few hundred miles away from port?

Essentially, satellite TV services were designed for use in stationary buildings on land, so the issue of a subscriber moving their home up and down a coastline is still a sticky one for providers. The main issue, at least for satellite TV service providers like DIRECTV® and DISH Network®, is that local advertisers pay certain rates based on how many viewers in their area can reasonably be expected to see their ads. (Consider your local coffee shop as an example; the owner probably doesn’t care if someone three states away sees their ad, because that person isn’t likely to come in for their morning coffee after seeing the commercial.) So, when satellite TV became widely available in the late 1990s, laws were set to limit where certain channels can be broadcast to ensure that local programming was reaching only local viewers.

What’s the difference between “local channels” and “distant network broadcasts”?

They’re basically the same thing. Your local channels are the ones that are broadcast only in your demographic market area (DMA), and include local news, weather, traffic reports, and advertisements. A “distant network broadcast” offers similar programming to viewers outside their DMA by showing the East or West Coast feeds from national networks like ABC, CBS, or NBC. Distant network broadcasts are the only way to watch these networks when you are outside your DMA, and require a waiver.



When you’re watching satellite TV in your home on land, this difference doesn’t really matter because you’re not about to sail off down the coast in your house! But when you’re watching TV in your home on the water, things change – if you cruise to a destination outside your DMA (which is based on the home

address on your satellite TV subscription), you will lose access to local channels no matter what kind of antenna you’re using.



Dear []:

My family and I own a boat equipped with a satellite TV system from KVH Industries, Inc., in Middletown, RI. It is our understanding that the Senate is currently considering the Satellite Home Viewer Extension and Reauthorization Act (“SHVERA”), and I’d like to draw your attention to an issue faced by many boaters who seek to receive satellite television services on their vessels that travel throughout United States waters.

Under current law, satellite television providers generally may provide local network programming to customers in the local market but are also permitted to offer “distant network services” (“DNS,” i.e., network programming outside the local market) to commercial trucks and recreational vehicles. It was considered appropriate to give such customers access to distant network signals since they are highly mobile and could be out of range of the over-the-air signal or the satellite-provided local signal. Boats, like RVs, are often first or second homes for their owners, and we would also like to take advantage of this exception to enjoy our favorite satellite TV programming as we travel.

Unfortunately, boats were not included in the exception because satellite television service to vessels was very uncommon at the time the original provision was adopted. However, thanks to ground-breaking technology from companies like KVH, this situation has changed dramatically. Now, vessels as small as 20 feet commonly receive satellite-delivered television and broadband communications services. Unfortunately, under the current DNS restrictions, such vessels can only receive over-the-air network programming or the satellite-provided network signal in limited geographic areas, so access to programming can change or disappear entirely when they travel to other regions within the United States. As a result, boaters lack access to local network programming when in remote areas or away from their home waters.

This issue is not limited to small vessels or leisure craft. Did you know that U.S. Coast Guard vessels are significant users of maritime satellite TV products and services, but are prohibited from receiving DNS signals? One of the reasons the U.S. Coast Guard uses this equipment is to provide a morale benefit to personnel onboard vessels deployed on homeland security and related missions. The opportunity to deliver DNS signals from the home port of U.S. Coast Guard vessels will add significantly to this benefit by allowing sailors to remain informed of local events at home.

My family and I believe that the disparate treatment of maritime vessels and land mobile vehicles can be easily resolved with the inclusion of minor technical language to SHVERA that would permit maritime vessels to receive DNS programming in the same fashion as commercial trucks and recreational vehicles. Thank you for your attention to this issue.

Sincerely,

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