

# KEEPING ONSTAR ON

## In search of an analog-to-digital conversion

General Motors' OnStar is a hit. More than 2.5-million subscribers pay a monthly fee for service. Its satellite network and three call centers, two in the U.S. and one in Canada, handle about 700 airbag deployments and 32,000 lockout calls per month. The latest version diagnoses mechanical problems, tracks stolen vehicles, and finds the nearest gas station. But a problem looms for subscribers. It's in a footnote in the specifications chart for the Saturn L300 on GM's Web site, though it affects other OnStar-equipped vehicles: "FCC ruling 02-229 eliminates the requirement that wireless carriers support the analog network after February 16, 2008. As a result of this ruling, if carriers for OnStar elect to provide only digital service commencing on February 16, 2008, the OnStar system in this vehicle may not operate."

Wireless carriers are required to provide nationwide analog service, and many also offer digital service. But two years ago, the Federal Communications Commission ruled that cellular phone carriers may convert to digital-only systems after February 16, 2008. Most OnStar systems extant, including many

sold in 2004 models, are analog only. Some have both analog and digital capability, and GM says all the systems in the 2005 models should have "Generation 6" OnStar with dual capability.

However, many wireless carriers will go exclusively digital by the deadline. Without some sort of analog-to-digital conversion, most pre-2005 OnStar systems are useless.

"We're working on a plan," says OnStar spokesman Robert Herta. It could be a conversion kit, but what it would cost and who'll pay the bill remain a few of many questions. Digital is regarded as clearer and sharper, but when OnStar began building its system, there were far more

analog carriers. How do you know which OnStar you have? All OnStar systems offered from 1996 to 2002 are analog only. Some offered in 2003 and 2004 are analog only, but are capable of simple conversion to digital. And some systems in 2004 models, and probably all the 2005 and later models, have dual capability. See [www.onstar.com](http://www.onstar.com) for more information. Bottom line: GM and OnStar will most likely find a solution well in advance of the FCC changeover option. "If there's one thing you should know about OnStar," Herta says, "it's that we're committed to our subscribers. That won't change."  
—Steven Cole Smith

