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Blog

# **BLOG: Tracking The 5G Wireless Wave That Will Gain Momentum In 2022**

#### Read Time: ~7 Minutes

While COVID-19 slowed the wireless wave's deployment, 2021 was marked by advancements in the development and innovation of 5G. In this blog, we update readers on the state of the 5G deployment in the U.S. as we enter 2022 and discuss the implications for the Canadian technology 5G landscape.

This year should see U.S. carriers gain momentum and intensify competition after the slow but steady groundwork they laid in 2020 and 2021. In 2022 and 2023, Verizon and AT&T plan to prioritize deploying their C-band spectrum that is a cornerstone of each of their highest performance 5G networks. Readers will recall that both carriers spent a combined ~\$70B at last February's auction for C-band spectrum licenses. In contrast, T-Mobile should be pre-occupied with the rollout of its own mid-band spectrum which it gained after its 2020 acquisition of Sprint. All carriers have ambitious plans to reach between 200 million and 300 million people by the end of 2023 with their high-performance 5G networks; a large contrast to the mere two million U.S. subscribers that had access in 2020 (Lightreading).

As carriers' 5G deployment plans progress this year, the list of 5Gcompatible phones for consumers should also continue to expand. Already, handset manufacturers have added additional 5G-enabled devices to their lists since our last blog, including Apple's iPhone 13, Samsung Galaxy's Z Flip 3, and Z Fold3 5G, among many others.

While we view 5G as an exciting and investable technology theme, the direct opportunities in Canada are currently limited to the carriers and a handful of smaller technology companies. This slow but steady progress provides investors extra time to assess the industry for opportunities.

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### 2022 5G Commercial Deployments Continue Their Progress

As the 5G wireless wave gains momentum, our goal is to track its progress and implications. Our "Tracking The 5G Tidal Wave" blog provides updates for both global and Canadian developments, providing context and insights to investors.

The 5G commercial deployment plans in the U.S. experienced delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic; a slow rollout that extended into 2021. However, the pace is starting to pick up steam as we look to 2022. To explain why and how, we begin by discussing the current state of 5G deployment in the U.S., covering the plans of its three largest carriers before we continue with the known carrier network deployment plans for 2022. Throughout this blog we refer to "high-performance 5G networks" as the 5G carrier networks which are comprised of mid- or high-band spectrum, or a combination of both.

We conclude by discussing what these 5G trends mean for investors who continue to have time to assess the opportunities in 5G. These are substantial and range from consumer applications to enterprise IoT applications. Terry Matthews, the prolific founder and Chairman of Wesley Clover, reiterated to us that the 5G investment cycle is one of the most important technology trends of the next decade. Canada is in a terrific position to benefit, given its leadership and development of this important technology as well as its 5G innovation hub in the Ottawa/Kanata region.

While investors have been given extra time to assess the opportunities in the space, it is important that certain commercial deployment companies (like Nokia) have begun to outperform the early lab/field trial plays. That trend should continue and broaden out as further 5G investments take place, and both consumers and enterprises begin to adopt its many use cases.

### Mid-band Deployments To Dominate U.S. 5G Plans In 2022

The three major U.S. carriers – Verizon, AT&T, and T-Mobile – continue to deploy their highest performance 5G networks that combine both mid- and high-band (or millimeter Wave, mmWave) spectrum. Readers will recall that 5G has already been available in low-band, mid-band and high-band to varying degrees.

#### Low-band 5G Is Virtually Everywhere

Low-band nationwide 5G coverage is available and characterized as any spectrum that is lower than 1GHz. While it can cover a large geographic footprint, it does not offer a higher speed advantage, and in fact is often slower than 4G LTE (Nokia). In terms of low-band 5G deployment, T-Mobile's low-band 5G is in the lead in terms of coverage, and reaches more than 310MM people. Second is AT&T with coverage of 255MM people, followed by Verizon which covers 230MM people (CNET).

#### Competition Intensifies Within Mid-band 5G And Sees Some Hiccups

Mid-band is available but not yet broadly. This type of frequency ranges between 1 - 6 GHz and offers faster speeds and greater capacity than low band. It also offers a much larger coverage area than high-band mmWave and can penetrate walls, but does not offer the download speed of over one gigabyte per second (Gbps) as mmWave does.

Verizon and AT&T's mid-band strategy, which runs on C-band frequencies (3.7 - 3.9 GHz), was slated to begin its rollout in late December. The plans hit a snag last month due to safety concerns raised by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) over the potential of the C-band frequency interfering with radio altimeters, which help planes determine altitude and distance from other objects. Issues with altimeters can jeopardize a plane's ability to operate safely. For now, a temporary agreement has been reached whereby Verizon and AT&T can continue their rollout, but are prohibited from activating C-band 5G within two-mile buffer zones around airports. This agreement still enables both carriers to expand with 90% of their planned 5G service expansion (NYT).

"5G is one of the most important technology trends in the next decade. Canada is in a terrific position to benefit, given its leadership and development of this important technology."

- Terry Matthews, Founder and Chairman of Wesley Clover International Each carrier has different mid-band coverage ambitions over the next two years. Verizon's mid-band already covers ~100MM people and 1,700 cities. The company expects to spend between five billion and six billion dollars in capex over the next year to increase coverage to 175MM people by late 2023. Mid-band is a crucial aspect of Verizon's highest performance 5G strategy, which in combination with the company's mmWave spectrum, is marketed and offered to consumers as **Ultra Wideband 5G**.

AT&T's C-band spectrum, meanwhile, is currently accessible in only a few markets, including Austin, Chicago, Dallas-Fort Worth, Detroit, Houston, Jacksonville, Miami and Orlando. The company has plans to reach 75MM people by 2022 and 200MM people by 2023. In combination with the company's high-band 5G spectrum, it is marketed as **5G+**.

In contrast, T-Mobile's mid-band strategy, which does not rely on C-band, has avoided the regulatory issues encountered by Verizon and AT&T. Its acquisition of Sprint in 2020 came with vast mid-band spectrum holdings in the 2.5 GHz band. Its mid-band footprint, marketed as **Ultra Capacity 5G**, covers 210MM people, with plans to cover over 300MM people by late 2023.

Readers will recall that carriers bid more than \$80B at last February's auction for the C-band portion of the wireless spectrum for 5G. Verizon spent \$46B, followed by AT&T (\$23B), and T-Mobile (\$9B) (NYT).

#### High-band 5G Coverage Remains Concentrated In High-volume Areas

High-band 5G typically ranges between 24 - 47 GHz and is not broadly available. Where deployed, it is often only accessible in certain areas with limited range due to its reliance on unobstructed proximity to cell towers. These spots are typically outdoors, available in a limited range, and often in places with high human-concentration levels; like sports stadiums and airports. Nonetheless, mmWave is an essential component to carriers' overall 5G strategy, in combination with their low- and mid-band spectrums.

Verizon continues to expand the coverage of its mmWave offerings, which now cover 82 cities, up from 57 at the time of our last report. The company launched its new Ultra Wideband 5G offering on January 19. It is purported to be 10x faster than typical 4G LTE speeds.

AT&T's high-band 5G offering (marketed as "**5G+**") is progressing slower than Verizon's. It is currently available in 44 cities, up from the 38 we reported a year ago. This coverage will also be augmented by AT&T's C-band spectrum.

T-Mobile too offers high-band 5G, but to a much more limited extent than Verizon and AT&T due to its prioritization of mid-band in its 5G strategy over mmWave. Nonetheless, the company currently offers high-band 5G in Atlanta, Cleveland, Dallas, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and New York, with plans to add additional cities to the list.

High-performance 5G supports both speed and low latency. Within two to three years, the benefits of smaller network delays or lower latency should be available with national high-performance 5G coverage. It is a crucial component of carriers' strategy to increasingly move consumers up into more comprehensive, albeit expensive, coverage plans.

Consumers will require a device capable of accessing these high-performance 5G networks, and in particular, the newly-available C-band spectrum. Since our last report, a number of new devices with this capability have been introduced into the market.

### **5G Handset Options And Adoption Grows**

The high-performance 5G networks of all three carriers are compatible with numerous new devices introduced to the market over the last year. This includes Apple's iPhone 13 and 12, in addition to its iPad 5G series. Samsung's Galaxy S21 series, Flip 3 and Fold 3 are on this list as well. Devices within the Google Pixel 6 series, however, are currently only compatible with AT&T and T-Mobile's high-performance 5G networks. Verizon has stated that the Pixel 6 series and other 5G-enabled phones that do not currently support its C-band spectrum will receive software updates to make them compatible in early 2022. The company plans to have over 20 C-band compatible devices by the end of the year. AT&T already offers 17 devices that support its C-band network.

#### **5G-enabled Smartphone Adoption Increases**

Counterpoint Research estimated that between 2020 and mid-2021, 5G smartphones significantly increased their U.S. market share, increasing from 3% of total U.S. mobile phone sales in January 2020 to 57% by March 2021. This aligns with data from IDC's Telecom Services Tracker which confirmed that in mid-2021, 5G-enabled phones represented 60% of the smartphones in the U.S. By the end of 2021, 5G smartphone sales are expected to have represented 80% of U.S. mobile sales.

Growth in the U.S. 5G smartphone market in 2021 was largely driven by Apple's iPhone 13, which in the December quarter accounted for over half of the company's total revenue. The device holds the top market share in the country according to Apple CEO Tim Cook. Fierce Wireless reports that 85% of the company's smartphone revenue is from 5G devices, vs Android where that figure is just over half.

This year is expected to be characterized by intense competition between carriers, who are likely to continue strong trade-in promotions on flagship devices, a trend that was kicked off by AT&T in 2021. These will be crucial for carriers to increase their average revenue per user (ARPU) and attract new customers to their networks, ultimately helping offset the costs of their 5G deployments (Counterpoint Research).

#### 5G Average Sales Prices Increased In 2021 But Trend Should Reverse

In 2021, supply chain shortages impacted 4G components more than 5G components, and this has had a more of a detrimental impact on smartphone manufacturers with a higher portfolio mix of 4G devices (e.g., Android) than those with a higher proportion of 5G devices (e.g., Apple).

This has resulted in a bump in the 5G average selling prices (ASP) as the production of higher-value devices is not as materially impacted by shortages. IDC expects 5G-powered smartphones to have an ASP of \$643 in 2021, which is 1.7% higher than in 2020 due to the immense success of the iPhone 12 and 13 (the iPhone 13 ranges in price from \$699 to \$1,099). By the end of 2023, IDC expects ASPs to drop to \$416 as competition in the 5G Android space increases and applies downward pressure on 5G ASPs.

#### Beyond Smartphones: Other Devices That Will Benefit From 5G

As 5G smartphone adoption rises, additional innovative products that benefit from 5G will also be introduced into the market. For example, we have heard that Apple may be launching its own 5G modem as part of its 2023 iPhone line up (Mac Rumors). Once released, it would help harness other related IoT applications.

5G smartphones have increased their U.S. market share from 3% of total U.S. mobile phone sales in early 2020 to 57% in March the following year. Adoption should continue to rise as more 5G-enabled smartphone options enter the market and average selling prices eventually start to fall.

### **Conclusion: 5G Is An Investable Theme Beyond 2022**

"5G has the potential to deliver \$8 trillion of economic value over time." - Nokia Labs Consulting According to Nokia Labs Consulting, 5G has the potential to deliver \$8 trillion of economic value over time. Prior to that happening, the network must be upgraded. In the U.S. alone it is estimated that US\$275 billion must be invested in networks over the 5G cycle, according to the industry trade group CTIA. 5G wireless spectrum, infrastructure for base stations, the core of the network, and all the next generation applications should benefit from this very large investment cycle that is likely to play out over the next 10 years. The 5G opportunity is large and there will be multiple ways for investors to participate. The graphic in Exhibit 1 shows the 5G cycle by phase and year indicating when specific companies are expected to benefit.

In 2021, the share prices of lab and field trial companies (e.g., Keysight Technologies, Viavi) performed well, while U.S. carriers have lagged during the second half of 2021. The only exception is T-Mobile, which had a run-up in its share price in the first half of 2021. Infrastructure companies like Ciena, Nokia, and Ericsson also performed well in 2021 and continue to do so in 2022. This is positive as it points to investors anticipating the scale-up phase of the 5G investment cycle.

We reiterate that Canada is a global hub for 5G wireless development with much of it centered in the Kanata/Ottawa, Ontario region. The area is home to the most important R&D centers for the large and established infrastructure companies like Ciena, Nokia and Ericsson, and to emerging private companies that include Solace and Think RF.

In Canada public companies, including Baylin, have seen their share prices well off their peaks from 2015. In 2021, it remained relatively unaffected by 5G opportunities. Baylin has suffered from execution issues and supply chain constraints due to COVID-19. That resulted in the change of its CEO. Leighton Carroll agreed to join the company as President and Chief Executive Officer in June 2021, and brings 25 years of experience in wireless networks. Prior to Baylin, he held progressively senior positions within AT&T, including as a leader of significant business units within AT&T and as a merger & integration executive.

Beyond its leadership challenges, Baylin suffered from lower-than-expected small cell densification by its major carrier customers (the largest being AT&T). A recovery in standalone 5G and alternate Internet of Things use-cases could help Baylin. Timing on this beginning remains unclear.

While we are still in the early stages of a 10-year 5G cycle, investors continue to get extra time to assess the commercial or field deployments for the next round of opportunities. The carrier plans for 2022 and 2023 are to deploy their mid-band spectrum across the U.S. and encourage consumers to upgrade to 5G devices on their networks. With these two-year-long deployment plans known, we will continue to track their progress. As they advance, it should begin to reveal investment opportunities.

Longer term, as high-performance 5G becomes more prevalent, it will allow many of these companies to benefit. The graphic in Exhibit 1 shows our timeline and the impact to the related companies and carriers.

While still in the early stages of a 10-year 5G cycle, investors are getting extra time to assess commercial and/or field deployments to identify the next round of opportunities.

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Exhibit 1: The 5G Deployment Cycle – Companies That Should Benefit By Phase And Year, 2018 – 2022 And Beyond

Source: Company reports and CIBC World Markets Inc.

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