Abstract—Flexible licensing model is a necessary enabler of the technical and procedural complexities of Spectrum Access System (SAS)-based sharing framework. The purpose of this study is to explore the effectiveness of 3.5 GHz Licensing Framework - based on census tracts as area units, areas whose main characteristic is population. As such, the boundary of census tract does not follow the edge of wireless network coverage. We demonstrate why census tracts are not suitable for small cell networks licensing, by (1) gathering and analysing the official census data, (2) exploring the boundaries of census tracts which are in the shape of non-convex polygons and (3) giving a measure of effectiveness of the licensing scheme through metrics of area loss and the number of people per census tract with access to spectrum. Results show that census tracts severely impact the effectiveness of the licensing framework since almost entire strategically important cities in the U.S. will not avail from spectrum use in 3.5GHz band.

Our paper does not seek to challenge the core notion of geographic licensing concept, but seeks a corrective that addresses the way the license is issued for a certain area of operation. The effects that inappropriate size of the license has on spectrum assignments lead to spectrum being simply wasted in geography, time and frequency or not being assigned in a fair manner. The corrective is necessary since the main goal of promoting innovative sharing in 3.5 GHz band is to put spectrum to more efficient use.

Index Terms—Spectrum sharing, geographic spectrum licensing, census tracts, 3.5 GHz band sharing framework, non-convex polygon optimisation, area loss, population per census tract with access to spectrum.

I. INTRODUCTION

The licensing framework for sharing the 3.5 GHz band is based on the notion of census tracts. Census tracts are geographical areas defined on the basis of population statistics with their area boundaries not expected to change much over time. The Federal Communications Commission has adopted the census tract demographic areas as the licensing area units - their cartographic boundaries will serve as boundaries of allowed licensed operation in the 3.5GHz band [1]. In this paper, we explore whether this choice makes sense and what implications this choice has for efficient spectrum usage.

Attention from the academia and spectrum regulation sector in the past few years has been directed towards the Spectrum Access System (SAS) - a technologically sophisticated system of multiple databases that will manage the tiers of diverse users, set in a complex spectrum sharing environment of the 3.5GHz band. Specially three areas of SAS-based sharing have been discussed in the literature: (1) architectural implementation and feasibility of the SAS system [2], [3], (2) regulatory and policy issues around license design, spectrum rights and enforcement classes for the future SAS system [4], [5], and (3) incumbent tier coexistence with small cell operators in the band [6], [7].

Despite being the basic unit on which the licensing framework for 3.5 GHz band is based, the impact of census tracts on the effectiveness of the framework has not been analyzed in detail. A licence to use spectrum is granted with the purpose of avoiding harmful interference that the licensee may experience from the neighboring spectrum users. Therefore to efficiently manage the spectrum use, spectral and geographical neighbors have to be issued with compatible licenses. For the 3.5 GHz band, the spectrum users are Citizens Broadband Radio Service (CBRS) users, a new class of service established by the FCC in order to promote innovative sharing for 3.5 GHz band [8]. The right to transmit (specified in the license content) for CBRS users will define the area of operation, the frequencies, and the power levels of operation. One license for CBRS users will be issued per census tract. Therefore to limit the risk of interference to neighbouring census tracts, CBRS nodes cannot be deployed too close to the boundary of the census tracts. More specifically, if licenses for two adjacent census tracts are issued to different CBRS networks - the nodes of these networks can only be deployed within the set-back distance from the border of the census tract. The distance is determined by the propagation characteristics of the band and FCC technical rules on CBRS operation [9]. As illustrated in Fig[1] under these conditions, the existence of a grey space area where CBRS networks cannot be deployed points to the problem of spectrum waste over the area, which we address in this paper.

Google Inc. has raised the problem of the census tract within the stakeholders’ filings to the FCC[1] under the 3.5 GHz docket 12-354 [10]. To substantiate their concerns, Google carried out a fairly simplified geometry analysis of the census tract area boundaries in which they are represented as equivalent circular areas. Within these circles, the set-back area in which no CBRS devices can be deployed was shown to be substantial.

In the same filing, other stakeholders expressed their support for the Commission’s proposal on census tracts. The arguments

1 Stakeholders filings to the Commission are available at ECFS home page: http://apps.fcc.gov/ecfs/.
Economic Areas (MEAs)

Entire cities, classified in the U.S. census databases as Major

Analyze boundaries of real census tracts. We conduct studies on
census data (cartographic files and census statistics) in order to
for a number of specific locations. Therefore we use official
framework for 3.5 GHz band or whether it is an issue only
try would severely jeopardize the flexibility of the licensing
scheme. It is not clear whether the existence of intersecting
2

Of census tracts and further explore such geographic licensing
which would severely jeopardize the flexibility of the licensing
framework for 3.5 GHz band or whether it is an issue only
for a number of specific locations. Therefore we use official
census data (cartographic files and census statistics) in order to
analyze boundaries of real census tracts. We conduct studies on
entire cities, classified in the U.S. census databases as Major
Economic Areas (MEAs).

Sample cities for the study are:
New York City (Manhattan Borough), Washington DC and
San Francisco, CA - selected as urban area types based on
their diverse population densities.

As a proxy of spectrum utilisation, we use two efficiency
metrics to analyze the effectiveness of census tracts-based
licensing. The first metric of Area Loss Percentage (ALP)
as introduced in [10], takes into account the boundaries of the
license areas defined through the ratio of CBRS-allowed
area and the corresponding census tract area. The second
takes account of the essential characteristic of a census tract,
namely the demographics. Hence we introduce a metric we
term Population of Census Tract with Access to Spectrum
(PCTAS), which gives us an opportunity to evaluate spectrum
utilisation in terms of real consumers of network capacity who
will be affected by the sharing rules for 3.5 GHz band.

Our results show that even in the best propagation conditions
in the band, for which the area that would be off-limits to
CBRS nodes is minimised - the implications can be stark.
For example, in the case of Manhattan, 82% of census tracts
license areas will not be available for deployment if one
license is issued per one census tract. For the less favourable
propagation conditions, the Manhattan area cannot be used for
spectrum sharing in 3.5 GHz at all, and results for Washington
DC and San Francisco show that less that 10% of census tracts
in both cities is actually available for deployments.

To begin with the framework itself, in Section II we intro-
duce the aspects of SAS-based sharing and potential issues
with the licensing scheme. New classes of users created for
this band are explained with the specific technical rules that
will affect the licensing framework whose area unit is a census
tract and we overview the details of census tracts. In Section
III we describe the study conducted followed by the results
presentation and discussion in Section IV. The last section
concludes the paper.

II. SHARING FRAMEWORK AND SAS

The President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Tech-
nology (PCAST) Report [11] has called for innovation in
spectrum sharing by mapping the technology and regulatory
enablers and advancing them both so that sharing becomes a
norm. The sharing framework for 3.5 GHz band accommod-
dates diversity of users, envisons a range of different tech-
nologies to be used and supports many different applications
to enable efficient sharing.

One of the many inspiring messages of the PCAST report
was that wireless users will get to share military spectrum. To
embed this promising sharing diversity into the set of effective
and clear regulatory rules of operation, the FCC has put a
stamp of approval on such message by first - creating an
entirely new class of service for the band [8], and second -
adopting the technical rules of CBRS operation [9]. The
broad range of future usage is suggested in the title itself,
Citizens Broadband Radio Service. The type of usage and the
classes of services under the CBRS name, as depicted in Fig
range from licensed carrier cells, fixed wireless broadband to
advanced home networking and any other uses.

Incumbent Access (IA) users, as primary holders of spec-
trum rights have the highest priority to access the spectrum
which is reflected in exclusion and protection zones in which
Priority Access (PA) and General Authorized Access (GAA)
users cannot operate. For the 3.5 GHz band, the IA users are
federal users (military high-powered radars on ship platforms
across the coastline) and grandfathered fixed satellite services
(FSS). Federal incumbent use is a matter of national security
and therefore such users need continuous protection from
interference. However, national defence missions are usually
executed in shorter times and in limited geographic areas,
therefore unused portions of spectrum in space, time and
frequency can be reallocated to other users. These users will
receive protection from harmful interference that commercial
users in lower tiers would generate; moreover they are not
required to mitigate interference they generate to lower tiers.

Intersection of census tracts is illustrated in [10] as a location where several
census tracts meet, e.g. Washington Convention Center. If an operator wishes
to serve the users at this location, it would need to aggregate several licenses
for all census tracts that meet there. Details about the rules in Licensing
Framework for 3.5 GHz are elaborated in Section II.

http://transition.fcc.gov/oet/info/maps/areas/
The Licensing scheme and Frequency Assignments

PA users need to be issued with a license to access spectrum through a geographic licensing scheme - to operate within the boundaries of one census tract area. The U.S. is divided into 74,000 census tracts, whose boundaries follow political (e.g., subdivision of counties) or geographic boundaries like rivers and roads. They are constructed to encompass a population of 2,000-4,000 on average.

A PA network operator will be issued a license to operate within one census tract in one 10 MHz channel. The license duration is 3 years and is non-renewable. However, aggregation of spectrum is allowed in all three dimensions (space, frequency and time). Spatially, one PA user is allowed to aggregate an unlimited number of census tract areas in order to serve more users. In frequency, a maximum of four 10 MHz channels within one census tract area can be aggregated. In time, PA license (PAL) applicants can apply for 2 consecutive license terms within the first applicant window, gaining in such way the license for 6 years.

The size of the census tracts varies, from areas less than a square mile in high dense urban regions, to 85,000 square miles in less inhabited rural regions. They often intersect roads, strategic touristic attractions or institutions of high commercial interest. Their intersection combined with the technical rules for a licensed operation means that an operator may have to acquire several adjacent census tracts licenses to deploy a small cell network and serve one particular building. On the other hand, when census tracts are too large, spectrum is wasted per area because of exclusivity of only one PAL operating in that tract per one 10 MHz chunk.

GAA users do not need to get a license and access spectrum opportunistically, similarly to an unlicensed mode of operation with the difference of being licensed-by-rule in the framework. This means that SAS assigns GAA users dynamically based on the demand, whenever and wherever spectrum is free from PA use. It also means that GAA devices have to be FCC technically certified (ability to tune to given frequencies or having embedded sensing capabilities in the device).

Despite the fixed bandwidth that SAS will assign to PA users (multiple of 10 MHz), according to the demand and interference conditions SAS may move them to other 10 MHz spectrum chunks, if needed. To GAA users SAS will allocate from the pool of frequencies instead, i.e. any frequency free from PA use in the portion of 150 MHz, where interference constraints are satisfied. The dynamic assignments of 10 MHz chunks to PAs and free frequencies from GAA pool of 150 MHz, performed by a SAS system will follow the demand and supply principle whilst providing assurance that some level of assignment convention is met. The directive on more efficient spectrum use also means that spectrum is assigned contiguously and continuously. For this reason, to assure fairness among users in the framework - GAA users are allowed in the entire band of 150 MHz as long as incumbent and PA users tiers are not utilising the specific channels.

While the GAA users do not need licenses, since they get initially, FCC proposed frequency assignment for GAA users of minimum 50 percent of the 150 MHz to be reserved for them in any census tract. After commenters questioned the proportional approach as a potential cause of uncertainty in the marketplace, FCC revised the proposal and concluded that a maximum of 70 MHz can be reserved for PALs in any given license area. This means that GAA users may access all of 150 MHz in areas where spectrum is free (no PALs issued or in use) or up to 80 MHz where all PALs are in use.
TABLE I: Propagation Analysis - parameters

| Deployment         | Building Loss | Path Loss | Set-back |
|--------------------|--------------|-----------|----------|
| Outdoor            | 110 dB       | 110 dB    | 2.1 Km   |
| Indoor residential | 10 dB (wood) | 100 dB    | 663 m    |
| Indoor commercial  | 20 dB (metal)| 90 dB     | 210 m    |

The area of Manhattan, as an example of highly dense and urban area, is divided into 288 very small census tracts, with an extremely high population density of 69,467 people per square mile. The population density in urban area profiles of San Francisco and Washington DC is much lower (17,179 and 9,856 population per square mile, respectively), but census tracts areas are still small.

The data for this study comes from the official U.S. census database. Census tracts are presented in the form of cartographic boundary files, given in .kml and .shp format. To apply Cartesian geometry which is required by our study, we used the UTM (Universal Transverse Mercator) projection maps to convert geodetic coordinates of census tracts to Cartesian friendly, UTM coordinates (WGS84).

B. Propagation Analysis

Being above the 3GHz threshold up to which mobile cellular spectrum usage is ideal, the 3.5 GHz band is not ideal for exclusive, licensed and commercial mobile broadband usage. The core advantage of the band is a huge potential for geographic sharing. Having low powered deployments with the limited propagation range of the band will allow more users to operate in closer proximity.

Geographic-based licensing in this band is on the level of a census tract. Therefore, the power limits on a license boundary are proposed by the FCC in the rules for technical operation in 3.5GHz. The rules specify the conditions in which neighboring CBRS deployments should operate to reduce the risk of interference due to tier-interactions.

Anywhere along PA service area boundaries between different CBRS users, a signal strength level limit of -80 dBm, measured by a 0 dBi isotropic antenna in a 10 MHz bandwidth is proposed. The path loss amount required to meet the boundary limit is the difference of: allowed EIRP (30 dBm/10MHz), the boundary limit and building loss where existing, depending on the type of deployments. The distance, calculated from path

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\[\text{Distance} = \frac{\text{Path Loss}}{\text{Power Level}}\]

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A. Census tracts datasets

Traffic profile of metropolitan areas (particularly highly dense, urban areas) consists mostly of indoor residential and commercial traffic, but also outdoor WiFi traffic. The rules on technical operations in 3.5GHz band describe the PA and GAA spectrum usage corresponding to such traffic profiles, with the small cell deployments for indoor and outdoor categories of CBSDs. Based on their strategic importance and census statistics data, we selected 3 sample cities. The subjects of our study are: (1) New York City (Manhattan Borough), NY, (2) Washington, DC and (3) San Francisco, CA.

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3 http://www.census.gov/geo/maps-data/index.html

6 We used .kml files, which are based on WGS84 geodetic system. World Geodetic system 1984 is the current geodetic system being used by GPS and U.S. DoD to satisfy mapping, charting and geodetic requirements. It is geographic and globally consistent within 1m.

7 Referring to the 3.5GHz band means the 150 MHz of spectrum between 3550-3700 MHz.

8 The limited propagation of 3.5 GHz needs a technology that requires less range than macrocell networks to meet users demand. Propagation characteristics of 3.5GHz make the signal decay faster, which is why low-powered and dense small cell deployments empower this band. Small cells bring higher spatial and spectral reuse with its applications, since their larger density reduces the risk of interference in geography and spectrally which results in increased frequency reuse and network capacity. In addition, signal propagation of the band still allows flexible topologies, appropriate for non-line-of-site use.

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5 All CBSDs are required to register with a SAS and provide their location, antenna height above the ground, authorization status they request for (PA or GAA), FCC ID number, serial number of the device. Optionally, CBSDs should report on their sensing capabilities. Since frequency and power assignments are established by the SAS, all CBSDs must execute SAS instructions within 60 seconds.
loss free space model formula, for frequency of 3.6GHz (the frequency range is 3550-3700 MHz) and antenna gains of 0 dBi is the required set-back distance under different building losses. We summarise in Table 1 the path loss for different cases and the corresponding set-back distances.

In the following section, we use this distance to set the constraint on a boundary of the license area in order to compute the portion of the area that would be off-limits to CBSDs deployments, i.e. area in which CBSDs cannot meet the adopted boundary signal strength limit. As summarised in Table 1, CBSD deployments considered are indoor residential and indoor commercial and we used full-power CBSDs, Category A.

C. Computing the CBRS-allowed area

Census tracts polygons are non-convex polygons, irregular in shape and in size. In general, they are laid out as sets of multiple polygons, each of them given as a set of points in the geodetic coordinate system.

The problem of computing the CBRS-allowed area is formulated as a collection of quadratic programming problems with quadratic constraints. The assumption underlying the model is that the adjacent census tracts are allocated to different operators. This case can be interpreted as a worst case scenario, but extremely important one to look at since one of the core ideas of 3.5GHz framework is to allow operators to operate locally. For each of the original polygons we compute the largest polygon (if exists) whose distance from the boundary of the original one is at least the set-back distance determined by propagation analysis, based on FCC technical requirements for CBRS devices.

Let us denote by \( \{P_1, ..., P_N\} \) the set of points in UTM that describe a polygon. For each point \( P_i \), we determine a point \( P_i^* \) such that the distance between \( P_i \) and \( P_i^* \) is minimized, whilst a minimum distance \( d \) (which is the set-back distance) between \( P_i^* \) and every \( P_j \in \{P_1, P_2, ..., P_N\} \) is guaranteed, as formulated in (1). The set of points \( \{P_1^*, P_2^*, ..., P_N^*\} \) defines the new polygon.

\[
\min_{P_i^*} \ (P_i^* - P_j)^2 \\
\text{s.t.} \ (P_i^* - P_j)^2 \geq d^2, \forall j \in \{1, ..., N\}.
\]

(1)

It is important to note that in case the length of the segments that define the original polygon is greater than \( 2 \times d \), the solution to (1) could include points in boundary of the original polygon. To avoid this problem, we ‘densify’ the original polygon by adding additional points any time the length of a segment is larger than \( d \). This also improves accuracy in the proximity of corners.

D. Metrics

Here, we introduce two efficiency metrics to evaluate the census tract-based licensing. They are selected so that they encompass the main characteristics of census tracts: their boundary and their population. The area of each census tract polygon and the CBRS-allowed area are computed in order to evaluate the licensing scheme through the efficiency metrics of Area Loss Percentage and Population of Census Tract with Access to Spectrum. The area of each polygon is computed as the area of an irregular polygon with known coordinates, based on Green’s theorem.

The ALP metric, as defined in (2) takes into account the ratio between the CBRS-allowed area, denoted as \( A_{CBRS} \), and the area of the original census tract polygon, denoted as \( A_{CT} \). Under the propagation analysis applied, ALP gives the percentage of the area which cannot be used for sharing under technical rules for 3.5 GHz band.

\[
ALP = 1 - \frac{A_{CBRS}}{A_{CT}}, 0 < ALP \leq 1.
\]

(2)

To account for the basic characteristic of census tracts, i.e. their population - we introduce the metric PCTAS, defined in (3) as the percentage of the area of a census tract in which spectrum is not wasted, weighted by the population count \( P \) of the census tract.

\[
PCTAS = (1 - ALP) \times P.
\]

(3)

Under the propagation analysis applied and under the assumption of uniformly distributed population, PCTAS gives the population in census tract that can consume network capacity under the 3.5GHz spectrum sharing rules in the cities selected for the study.

IV. RESULTS

The results of our analysis are presented in Fig. 3, Fig. 4 and Fig. 5. To give a visual insight into the problem, Fig 3a (210m set-back distance) and Fig 3b (663m set-back distance) show the results of the area study for Washington DC. Green areas correspond to the portion of census tracts where CBRS deployment is allowed. Red areas correspond to areas off-limits to CBRS deployment. Compared to Manhattan and San Francisco, Washington DC results show a good outcome in terms of spectrum waste over the area for Washington. In fact, in Case I, the red areas cover almost entirely Manhattan and 35% of San Francisco. Only 18% of census tracts in Manhattan could accommodate CBRS deployments to satisfy the boundary constraint on a minimum distance dictated by propagation analysis (i.e., the best propagation conditions case). The impact of 663m set-back distance is severe in all three cities. As seen on Fig 5, only 9 tracts, out of 179 tracts of the District of Columbia - will be available to accommodate CBRS deployments under these conditions. For 2.1km set-back distance, no census tract will be available for use in all the considered cities.

If we look at the cumulative distribution function (CDF) for
the two efficiency metrics described in Section 3.3 we can get an insight into spectrum utilisation for the cities analyzed. In the Case I, as shown in Fig. 3, 82% of Manhattan census tracts will not be available for CBRS deployment. For the rest of the Manhattan areas, where deployment is possible, the area that is available for deployment is limited. For example, the probability that ALP is less than 50% is 0.0035. It means that even in the case the boundary limit can be satisfied, the potential for spectrum sharing could hardly be unlocked. In Case I, San Francisco area will be unavailable for deployments in about 35% of census tracts, but the probability that ALP is less than 50% is still very small, namely 0.025. In the second case of a larger set-back distance, the Fig. 3 shows that Manhattan area will not be available for deployments at all, and only 3-4% of Washington DC and San Francisco census tracts could be used as license areas.

We now look at the unavailability of spectrum for network capacity consumers within census tract boundaries. Fig. 4 shows the CDF of PCTAS for 210m and 663m cases of propagation conditions. In the Case I, Fig. 4a we can see that the probability that no one in Manhattan can consume the network service is 82%. Further, it is certain that less than half of the average number of people per census tract (5500) can be served. Also, with probability 1, less than three quarters of the average number of people per census tract (4087) in San Francisco will be served. Finally, in Washington DC the probability that less than average number of people per census tract (3360) will have a network service is 0.977. In Washington tracts with size of the population larger than 4000 people per tract, no one will take advantage of spectrum use. In the Case II, Fig. 4b no one in Manhattan can be served, almost no one in San Francisco and only less than
2000 people per census tract in Washington DC can consume network capacity.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The main conclusion from the detailed analysis of census tracts is that they do not provide a good basis on which to build a licensing framework. The FCC rightly recognizes that smaller license areas provide the potential for unlocking efficient sharing of spectrum in the 3.5GHz band using small cell deployments. But as our results have shown, even under propagation conditions that are favorable, many unit license areas are rendered unusable and that potential is not unlocked.

The problem of spectrum waste over the license area, reflected through the percentage of area loss and number of people precluded from spectrum use points to the fact that the boundaries of census tracts are not appropriate boundaries for a license area in a geographic licensing scheme envisioned for 3.5 GHz band. Not only that they mismatch with the spectrum propagation of small cell deployments, the main deployments that could put 3.5 GHz spectrum to more efficient use, but also finding the CBRS-allowed remains a problem with no solution even if the boundary limits are less stringent. In highly dense urban areas, census tracts are so small that it is not possible to form the CBRS-allowed area at all to fit the diverse spectrum usage so the interference between adjacent tracts is reduced. As we have shown, the smaller the census tracts are, more spectrum is wasted over the area.

Getting the licensing framework right is essential. The landscape in spectrum management has changed, in that it is accepted that some form of spectrum sharing will be part of the future. However it is still an open question as to which approaches will succeed. The 3.5GHz SAS-based sharing promises much and may be hampered in delivering if census tracts are at the core of its licensing framework.

Therefore we are pointing out that it is worth re-considering the licensing scheme, because the size and the shape of the license area matters. We propose the following geographic licensing models to take into consideration towards building an effective licensing framework that can fully support the SAS potential. Geographic area of deployment calculated based on the predicted actual spectrum usage should be the base area unit of the licensing scheme, i.e. area whose size is not fixed nor created for purposes other than spectrum usage. Describing the actual spectrum usage of an operator’s network is a research question we plan to address in our future work, in order to investigate how different network deployments need to be so that they can be allocated in the same license area and even in the same spectrum chunk.

Furthermore, the currently existing geographic licensing models for spectrum sharing are implemented on the borders of the U.S. with Canada and Mexico in 800MHz band. These models are built on the basis of geographic sharing while giving assurance that spectrum is assigned in a fair manner to adjacent operators, whose edge users will get the service under these conditions. Defined sharing and protection zones reduce the need for grey space non-allowed area and there is always someone using the frequencies in time and space, showing in a way that the operator networks can overlap and still avail from spectrum use.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This work is supported by the Seventh Framework Programme for Research of the European Commission under grant ADEL-619647 and the Science Foundation Ireland under grant CONNECT 13/RC/2077. We would like to thank Dr. Tim Forde for his insightful comments and valuable feedback which improved the quality of this paper.

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