

New TV deal an 'enormous challenge' for USM

Jason Munz, Southern Miss Sports Writer 9:20 p.m. CDT June 18, 2016



(Photo: USA TODAY Sports)

Many knew Conference USA would be fighting an uphill battle when the time came to negotiate a new television contract.

Earlier this month, it was revealed exactly how steep the financial ramifications of the new deal will be.

Conference USA, which is home to Southern Miss and 13 other athletic programs, entered into a pact with four separate broadcast networks that will generate \$2.8 million annually for the next two years, according to a [Virginian-Pilot](#) report. The new contract, which signals a massive dropoff in television revenue, will result in about \$200,000 a year for each of the league's member institutions. That's roughly \$700,000 less than what each school received per year under the terms of the previous deal.

Southern Miss athletic director Bill McGillis, in an exclusive interview with the [Hattiesburg American](#), did not sugarcoat the situation.

"It will be an enormous challenge," he said. "It will be a combination of continuing to tighten our bootstraps, maintaining a very lean budget on the expense side and really carefully managing those resources."



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In addition to the loss of television revenue, Conference USA also will no longer see money generated by exit fees paid to the league by former members such as Tulane, Memphis and Houston. Those exit fees totaled \$6.15 million, were distributed among the remaining Conference USA members and combined with the television revenue equaled about \$1.1 million per institution.

"We explored a number of traditional, digital and additional outlets during the negotiation process," Conference USA commissioner Judy MacLeod said in a press release last month. "Our interests are aligned and we are very excited about the potential of these partnerships. All parties will reap the benefits of these agreements."



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Despite the struggle facing athletic programs like Southern Miss, which has dealt with its share of financial hardships in recent years, McGillis is maintaining a positive outlook.

"While there is some loss in revenue which, no question, exacerbates our financial challenge as a [Group of Five](#) institution and makes it easy for people to get sucked into a doom-and-gloom mentality, I won't do it," he said. "Those numbers aren't black and white."

"The reality is that conference members will take a significant financial reduction from the previous television contracts. However, there are some real pluses to this next set of contracts."

As part of the new agreement, a number of Conference USA football games will be broadcast by ESPN, [CBS Sports Network](#), [American Sports Network](#) and [beIN Sports](#). FOX Sports was a partner with Conference USA under the previous deal; however, according to the [Virginian-Pilot](#), renegotiation efforts stalled when the league declined to move a number of its marquee games to midweek days.

But the opportunity for Southern Miss to play on ESPN, dubbed the "Worldwide Leader in Sports," was among the most attractive pieces of the puzzle for

McGillis. The Golden Eagles' season opener at Kentucky will be televised on [ESPNU](#), and their home game against Louisiana Tech on Nov. 25 will be broadcast on either ESPN, [ESPN2](#) or ESPNU. In addition, the league's championship game and six of its bowl games will be featured on one of the ESPN networks.

"That's a big win for Conference USA, in my judgement," he said. "I think that's been overshadowed. But I can't tell you how many people I heard from in my first three years in Hattiesburg wanting to know when Southern Miss would be back on ESPN."

beIN Sports will broadcast Southern Miss' home game against Troy on Sept. 17 and its road contest at North Texas on Nov. 19. Also, four more Golden Eagle games will be televised by ASN, bringing the team's minimum number of broadcast appearances to eight. The broadcast status of Southern Miss' road game at LSU is still undecided.

Another advantage of the new agreement, according to McGillis, is its length.

"It's a short-term agreement," he said, noting it expires after the 2017 athletic year. "I think it was a smart decision to achieve a short-term agreement given today's conditions."

McGillis added Southern Miss will receive an increase in NCAA distribution money in 2016, which will help offset the loss of television rights revenue.

"All schools receive it and it's based on a complicated formula," he said. "But that's a short-term solution. The only way those revenues will be truly offset is increasing our ticket sales in every sport, most significantly football."



**Southern Miss Athletic Director
Bill McGillis** (Photo: File photo)

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