

Net Neutrality lives on in Congress

Both the House Judiciary Committee and the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation are expected to review Net neutrality-related bills later this week.

The reviews come quickly as some lawmakers continue to keep Net neutrality afloat, with new bills that promote equality and competition over broadband, introduced last week.

They comes as debate continues over whether telecom companies and cable operators should be prohibited from favoring one provider's Web traffic or their own content over another's by ensuring faster downloads to companies that pay a tax, thus creating a two-tier system.

The Internet Freedom and Nondiscrimination Act of 2006 introduced by House Judiciary Committee Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner, Jr., R-Wis., and Ranking Member John Conyers, Jr., D-Mich., last week is expected to be considered by their Committee this week.

"This legislation is a necessary step to protect consumers and other Internet users from possible anti-competitive and discriminatory conduct by broadband providers," Sensenbrenner said. "The FCC recently reported that 98 percent of American consumers get their high speed broadband from either a cable company or a DSL provider. This virtual duopoly creates an environment that is ripe for anti-competitive abuses, and for which a clear antitrust remedy is urgently needed."

Specifically, the bipartisan-supported bill amends the Clayton Act to require network providers run on a discriminatory basis, so that content providers have an equal opportunity to reach consumers and refrain from interfering with users' access to lawful content, services, and applications.

On the Senate side, the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation will have its second review of Senators and Committee Co-Chairmen Ted Stevens, R-Alaska and Daniel Inouye's, D-Hawaii, telecom bill the Communications, Consumer's Choice, and Broadband Deployment Act of 2006.

The bill, introduced earlier this month, currently directs the FCC to commence an annual study of the Internet and information transmitted over the Internet, of which any problems arises, the agency would make recommendations to Congress as for its course of action -- the least aggressive of proposed bills in terms of net neutrality.

Stevens anticipates a vote on the bill come June 20, but Inouye has shown strong sentiments over the lack of Net neutrality regulation.

Moreover, two other members of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation U.S. Senators Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, and Byron Dorgan, D-ND, introduced the Internet Freedom Preservation Act last week.

If approved, the bill amends the Communications Act so that telecom companies operate in a nondiscriminatory manner but still manage the network by protecting the security of the network or offering different levels of broadband connections to users.

But it also requires than a network operators provide an option of purchasing a "standalone" broadband connection not to be bundled with cable, phone, or VoIP service.

Additionally, within 270 day of enactment, the FCC must adopt rules for resolution of complaints within 90 days of their filing. And it would require the FCC to report to Congress on the deliver of the delivery of content, applications and services into and over broadband networks.

"The Internet's open architecture allows access to the Internet for everyone equally," Dorgan said. "That access has been the cornerstone of the Internet's growth so far, and is vital to its continued success in the future. The Internet Freedom Preservation Act will ensure that the right to participate in the internet remains free and available to all, so that the innovation, economic opportunities, and consumer benefits it makes possible, will continue to flourish."

Both the Sensenbrenner-Conyers and Snowe-Dorgan bills add to make six net neutrality bills this year so far introduced between the House and Senate as the lawmaking body seeks to reform telecom and communications laws.

Net neutrality proponents have continued rallying for legislation on net neutrality, despite a previous effort to include a relevant amendment, dumped from the House Energy and Commerce Committee telecom-reform bill back in April.

However, new endorsers of Net neutrality now include a coalition of musicians joining the effort signing the Artists and Musicians for Internet Freedom petition, which now includes Moby, R.E.M., Q-Tip, the Indigo Girls, Jill Sobule, Wilco, Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, the Roots, the Dixie Chicks.

In fact, Moby was on hand Thursday on Capitol Hill with Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass. having recently introduced his own Network Neutrality Act of 2006, to show further support of Net neutrality and prompt lawmakers to support their cause.

"You will not be allowed to sell out the Internet to companies like AT&T without a huge public backlash," Moby remarked. "If you vote against Internet freedom and Net neutrality, don't be surprised if your constituents vote against you."

In the past, telecom companies have defending themselves by saying that such provisions is unnecessary, and that they would not compromise overall quality service or block access.

They argue that it should be able to charge companies who want it for faster delivery of content especially for VoIP, video over IP and TV over IP services, as companies continue to invest in adding bandwidth and new superfast fiber-optic technologies.

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