Court OKs TV rules opposed by Comcast, Cablevision

(AP) -- A federal court Friday upheld regulations that require cable TV companies to make sports programming and other channels they own available on equal terms to rival TV providers such as satellite companies.

The ruling by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia leaves in place the Federal Communications Commission "program access" rules, which are intended to ensure that cable companies cannot withhold highly desirable programming that they own from competitors.

The decision was a setback for Cablevision Systems Corp. and Comcast Corp., which were challenging the FCC's decision to extend a ban on exclusive programming contracts for five years. Comcast said it was disappointed in the ruling.

Comcast has nonetheless pledged to extend the program access rules to the local NBC and Telemundo stations it would control as part of its proposed combination with NBC Universal. Comcast is seeking FCC and Justice Department approval to buy a 51 percent stake in NBC Universal from General Electric Co.

FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski praised Friday's ruling. "The commission's program access rules have played a vital role in making diverse and attractive video programming available to cable and satellite TV viewers," he said in a statement.

Satellite TV provider DirecTV Inc. called the ruling "a win for consumers."

Messages seeking comment from Cablevision were not immediately returned.

Friday's ruling is the second key victory for cable rivals in as many months when it comes to program access rules.

In January, the FCC voted to close to the so-called "terrestrial loophole," which lets cable companies get around program access rules by distributing programming over landlines rather than satellite connections.

Comcast, Cablevision and Cox Communications Inc. have relied on the loophole to deny sports programming to competitors such as DirecTV, Echostar Corp.'s Dish Network, AT&T Inc.'s U-Verse video service and Verizon Communications Inc.'s FiOS video service.

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