

U.S. to roll out major broadband policy

(Reuters) - U.S. regulators will announce a major Internet policy this week to revolutionize how Americans communicate and play, proposing a dramatic increase in broadband speeds that could let people download a high-definition film in minutes instead of hours.

Dramatically increasing Internet speeds to 25 times the current average is one of the myriad goals to be unveiled in the National Broadband Plan by the the Federal Communications Commission on Tuesday.

The highly anticipated plan will make a series of recommendations to Congress and is aimed at spurring the ever-changing communications industry to bring more and faster online services to Americans as they increasingly turn to the Internet to communicate, pay monthly bills, make travel plans and be entertained by movies and music.

"This is a fairly unique event," said Paul Gallant, an analyst with Concept Capital. "The FCC really has never been asked to design a broad regulatory shift like this. Broadband is important and difficult because it threatens every established communications sector."

Some details of the plan have trickled out in the last few weeks including how to find spectrum to meet an anticipated explosion of handset devices capable of playing movies and music in addition to handling emails and voice calls.

But some carriers like AT&T Inc and Qwest Communications International Inc were irked last month when the agency's chief, Julius Genachowski, announced that the FCC would propose in the plan a goal of 100 Mbps speeds to be in place at 100 million American homes in 10 years. The current average is less than 4 Mbps.

In a sign of tension between the FCC and carriers, Qwest called it "a dream" and AT&T reacted by saying the FCC should resist calls for "extreme forms of regulation."

Since the FCC announcement, Cisco Systems Inc announced it would introduce a router that can handle Internet traffic up to 12 times faster than rival products. Google Inc has also gotten in on the hype, saying it plans to build a super-fast Internet network to show that it can be done. The FCC has praised both announcements.

The plans could also touch off tensions with television broadcasters, who will be asked to give up spectrum to wireless carriers who desperately need it for their mobile devices, such as the iPhone and Blackberry.

The FCC plans to let them share in the profits of auctions structured to redistribute

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the spectrum.

"We've developed a plan that is a real win-win for everyone involved and we have every expectation that it will work," Genachowski said in an interview with Reuters.

"We've certainly heard from a number of broadcasters who told us they think this is a promising direction and are getting ready to roll up their sleeves with us," he said.

The FCC also wants to make sure that anchor institutions -- government buildings, schools, libraries and healthcare facilities -- get speeds of about 1 gigabit per second by 2020.

The full broadband plan is expected to be released at a Tuesday meeting among the FCC's five members who are expected to discuss the results and recommendations of the roadmap, which was mandated by Congress. Congress may have to pass legislation to enact some portions of the plan.

FCC officials have said some of the goals are aspirational and should be viewed as a "living, breathing" document for the next decade in hopes of helping 93 million Americans without broadband get connected.

ACHIEVABLE

"It is both aspiration and achievable," Genachowski said.

The Obama administration has touted the plan as a way to create jobs and make energy use more efficient.

"It will be a call to action," said Blair Levin, who heads the FCC's broadband task force which has collected data and comments from the industry, academics and the public as well as from three dozen public workshops.

The FCC has placed most of its attention on broadband policy which Darrell West, director of governance studies at the Brookings Institution, called "the signature issue" since Genachowski took over the helm in late June.

"It means that broadband is going to drive other types of policy decisions and it really sets the parameters for telecommunications and new applications," West said.

FCC officials have said that the plan will not take sides on technology or applications, but they want to lay the groundwork to spur innovation and job creation.

Officials have said the plan will ask Congress to fund up to \$16 billion to build an emergency public safety system.

It would also tell lawmakers that a one-time injection of \$9 billion could accelerate broadband reach to the 4 percent of Americans who do have access. Otherwise they

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could let the FCC carry out a 10-year plan to realign an \$8 billion U.S. subsidy program for universal broadband access instead of universal phone access.

Experts call the plan ambitious but question if the FCC, which plans to spin off a series of rule-making proposals linked to the plan, can realistically make good on its recommendations.

"There's so little progress on this stuff in Washington," said Rob Atkinson, who heads the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation.

"I think Chairman Genachowski has a real opportunity to bring different warring interests under 50-75 percent of the plan."

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