Rep. Markey offers net-neutrality bill

By Peter Kaplan
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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Legislation designed to prevent broadband Internet providers from unreasonable interference with subscribers' access to content was introduced on Wednesday by a senior U.S. lawmaker.

The bill offered by U.S. Rep. Edward Markey is the latest to raise concerns about "net neutrality," an issue that pits open-Internet advocates against some service providers such as Comcast Corp, who say they need to take reasonable steps to manage traffic on their networks.

Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat, said his bill was aimed at preserving the "open architecture" of the Internet and preventing content providers from being subjected to "unreasonably discriminatory practices by broadband network providers."

"Our goal is to ensure that the next generation of Internet innovators will have the same opportunity, the same unfettered access to Internet content, services and applications that fostered the developers of Yahoo, Netscape and Google," Markey said in a statement.

The bill also would require regulators at the Federal Communications Commission to study the issue and hold public hearings.

Markey dismissed fears that his initiative was an attempt to "regulate" the Internet. "The bill contains no requirements for regulations on the Internet whatsoever," he said in another statement.

The net neutrality issue has been spotlighted by a series of incidents in which network operators were accused of hindering certain online data moving over their networks, such as file-sharing or text-messaging.

In the most recent example, the FCC has been looking into complaints by consumer
groups that Comcast favors or blocks certain types of content.

In comments filed with the FCC late on Tuesday, Comcast responded by telling regulators that it uses reasonable measures to manage traffic moving over its network, as some of its customers overwhelm the network by using file-sharing applications like BitTorrent.

In its written comments, Comcast gave its most detailed explanation of how it manages Internet traffic, naming BitTorrent as prime culprit, but again denied it blocks content, applications or discriminates among providers.

Comcast, which is the second-largest U.S. Internet service provider with more than 13 million subscribers, said the use of network management was essential to avoid congestion and impairment of some applications.

The Comcast complaints were the most recent of several incidents Internet service providers are looking at different ways of managing the increasing amount of traffic moving across their networks both for cost management and for quality of service reasons.

Last month Time Warner Cable Inc, which has more than 7.5 million Internet customers, said it is planning a trial to bill high-speed Internet subscribers based on their amount of usage rather than a flat fee, the standard industry practice.

Markey's proposal was greeted with skepticism by some telecommunications companies. An advocacy group that represents some of the companies, called Hands Off the Internet, said it had no objection to studying the issue but opposed any further regulations.

Such regulations "will create uncertainty for investors and Internet service providers that must build the infrastructure to meet consumer demands," said Hands Off the Internet.

However, Markey drew applause from some consumer groups and Internet companies, who say it is justified by past instances in which cable and telephone companies have interfered with Internet content.

The bill "will require the FCC to protect Internet freedom from the predatory efforts of the telco and cable gatekeepers," an advocacy group called the Open Internet Coalition said in a statement.

(Editing by Tim Dobbyn)