Internet plan doesn't protect price equality

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WASHINGTON -- US Senate Commerce Committee chairman Ted Stevens has offered a compromise in the fierce fight over legislation on Internet network neutrality, but stopped short of demands sought by content companies like Google Inc.

Google, Microsoft Corp., and other Internet companies have lobbied hard for Congress to bar broadband Internet service providers such as AT&T Inc. and Comcast Corp. from charging them to guarantee access and service quality, often called network neutrality.

AT&T and Comcast, two of the largest high-speed broadband Internet providers, have opposed any obligations imposed on their services or restricting their business operations.

Stevens, an Alaska Republican, has added a new section to his proposal aimed at preserving consumers' ability to surf anywhere on the public Internet and use any Web-based application, according to the latest draft obtained by Reuters over the weekend. However, the draft does not include a ban on pricing that the content companies have demanded.

Earlier versions of the bill only called for the Federal Communications Commission to report on Internet access, prompting Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii, the top Democrat on the committee, and some others to call for more protection.

Striking a compromise would probably make it easier for the bill to pass this year. AT&T and Verizon Communications want it to pass quickly, because it would also make it easier for them to get licenses to offer cable television service.

The Senate committee is scheduled to consider amendments and vote on the measure at a meeting Thursday. Spokesmen for Stevens and Inouye were not immediately available for comment.

Stevens's compromise would also create an FCC complaint process to be used if consumers believe that their access rights have been violated. The FCC would be authorized to adjudicate complaints with penalties, according to the draft.

However, the FCC would be barred from issuing any regulations under the new law that would add to the obligations on Internet service providers.

The compromise is somewhat similar to legislation that passed the House, but there are differences between the House and Senate that would have to be resolved.

Broadband providers argue that they would not block any public Internet site or application, but may want to offer private Internet-based services, for example, for customers to download movies.

But content companies worry that such a change would squeeze public Internet traffic into a narrower, slower lane.

Another new provision in the bill would require Internet providers to offer stand-alone service without forcing subscribers to sign up for other products, like voice or video services. Some companies already do so, but charge more.

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