CRTC must consider musicians' rights in radio hearings: recording industry

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OTTAWA -- Musicians' rights must be protected by the country's telecommunications regulator as it considers three bids for satellite radio licences, says the music recording industry.

The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission is holding hearings this week into bids by three consortiums that all want to offer the striking new radio technology on a subscription basis.

Satellite radio, growing in popularity in the United States and Europe, promises crystal-clear sound and a wide range of choices with little or no advertising.

But it raises many fundamental questions about Canadian content and how best to support homegrown artists in a medium that doesn't recognize borders.

The technology can also open the door for outsiders to pirate music - essentially stealing from artists, complains Graham Henderson, president of the Canadian Recording Industry Association.

"Latent in this technology are very significant threats to creators of music,"
Henderson said in an interview Tuesday.

Before it licenses any or all of the bidders, the CRTC should first demand they put in place technology to prevent broad theft of music by listeners building massive digital libraries of music, said Henderson.

His group is among a list of more than 30 interveners who want their opinions heard on the new technology and the wide sweep of issues that it raises.

Individuals, performers - including Susan Aglukark - and groups such as the Friends of Canadian Broadcasting have lined up to be heard.

First to apply for a licence was Toronto-based businessman John Bitove, whose Canadian Satellite Radio Inc. is a joint venture with American radio firm XM Satellite Radio Holdings, Inc.

It's promising more than 100 channels, including four Canadian, for a monthly fee of $12.99 - subscription charges are just one of the many differences between conventional, free radio and a satellite service.

The CBC, Standard Radio Inc., and U.S.-based Sirius Satellite Radio Inc., are making a similar pitch but propose to add CBC stations to the 100-channel mix for a similar fee.

Sirius can also offer popular shock-jock Howard Stern, recently signed to a five-year contract worth $500 million US.

The third and significantly different proposal before the CRTC comes from Toronto-based radio and television broadcaster CHUM Ltd., and its partner Astral Media Inc.

They would target larger cities only, offering signals from land-based transmitters rather than satellites.

In response to the CRIA's concerns about music theft, some satellite providers have argued the problem exists worldwide and would be hard to address in Canada alone.

Besides, the recording industry is pushing its demands for copyright protections too far, said Michael Geist, a law professor specializing in technology-related issues.

Copyright is designed to offer some protection while allowing personal use of music or texts but the recording industry is over-tipping the balance, said Geist, who teaches at the University of Ottawa.