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Bill Would Put Net Song Swappers in Jail

By REUTERS

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Internet users who allow others to copy songs from their hard drives could face prison time under legislation introduced by two Democratic lawmakers on Wednesday.

The bill is the strongest attempt yet to deter the widespread online song copying that recording companies say has led to a decline in CD sales.

Sponsored by Michigan Rep. John Conyers and California Rep. Howard Berman, the bill would make it easier to slap criminal charges on Internet users who copy music, movies and other copyrighted files over "peer-to-peer" networks.

The recording industry has aggressively pursued Napster, Kazaa and other peer-to-peer networks in court and recently announced it planned to sue individual users as well.

In a series of hearings on Capitol Hill last spring, lawmakers condemned online song swapping and expressed concern the networks could spread computer viruses, create government security risks and allow children access to pornography.

Few online copyright violators have faced criminal charges so far. A New Jersey man pleaded guilty to distributing a digital copy of the movie "The Hulk" in federal court three weeks ago, but the Justice Department has not taken action against Internet users who offer millions of copies of songs each day.

The Conyers-Berman bill would operate under the assumption that each copyrighted work made available through a computer network was copied at least 10 times for a total retail value of $2,500. That would bump the activity from a misdemeanor to a felony, carrying a sentence of up to five years in jail.

It would also outlaw the practice of videotaping a movie in the theater, a favorite illicit method of copying movies.

"While existing laws have been useful in stemming this problem, they simply do not go far enough," said Conyers, the top Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee.

A Conyers staffer said the bill had won the backing of many Democrats but Republicans had yet to endorse it.

The staffer said backers hoped to discuss the bill at a hearing on Thursday and combine it next week with another sponsored by Texas Republican Rep. Lamar Smith.

A Smith spokesman was not immediately available for comment.