

FCC votes to begin crafting 'net neutrality' rules

October 22 2009, By JOELLE TESSLER , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- Federal regulators took an important step Thursday toward prohibiting broadband providers from favoring or discriminating against certain kinds of Internet traffic.

Despite the concerns of the agency's two Republicans and telecommunications companies, the [Federal Communications Commission](#) voted to begin writing so-called "[network neutrality](#)" regulations. Proponents say the rules would prevent phone and cable companies from abusing their control over the market for broadband access.

FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski said the rules are needed to ensure that broadband subscribers can access all legal Web sites and services, including Internet calling applications and video sites that compete with the broadband companies' core businesses.

"Internet users should always have the final say about their online service, whether it's the software, applications or services they choose, or the networks and hardware they use to the connect to the Internet," Genachowski said.

The FCC's two other Democrats voted to support his plan. The agency's two Republican commissioners voted merely to start the formal rule-making process, and said they remain opposed to the substance of Genachowski's proposal.

Republican commissioner Robert McDowell said he remains unconvinced that broadband providers are engaging in widespread anticompetitive behavior that requires government intervention.

"I do not share the majority's view that the Internet is showing breaks and cracks, nor do I believe that the government is the best tool to fix it," he said.

Next up for the FCC is to actually craft the rules, with a vote on whether to adopt them expected to come by next summer.

That would culminate a five-year debate in Washington that has pitted Internet companies such as [Google](#) Inc. against some of the biggest phone and cable companies - including AT&T Inc., Verizon Communications Inc. and Comcast Corp. - which say the government should not tell them how to manage their networks.

The broadband providers insist they need flexibility to keep their networks running smoothly. They want to ensure that high-bandwidth applications such as YouTube videos don't hog too much capacity and impede other traffic, like e-mail and online searches. They also say that net neutrality regulations would discourage them from expanding and upgrading their networks.

"We continue to hope that any rules adopted by the commission will not harm the investment and innovation that has made the Internet what it is today and that will make it even greater tomorrow," Comcast Executive Vice President David L. Cohen said in a statement.

But companies such as Google, Amazon.com Inc., eBay Inc.'s Skype and Facebook argue that without such rules, the broadband companies will become online gatekeepers that can prioritize their own online services or those of their business partners - and potentially put others at a

disadvantage.

Markham Erickson, executive director of the Open Internet Coalition, called Thursday's vote "the first step toward ... creating a framework that promotes innovation and consumer choice on the Internet."

The Open Internet Coalition represents public interest groups and big Internet companies, including Google, Amazon and eBay.

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