Time Warner Cable says Big 4 shows to stay on-air

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(AP) -- Time Warner Cable Inc. said Thursday that its customers will still be able to view major programming from ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox even if it can't reach a deal with broadcaster Sinclair before their contract expires Friday at midnight.

About four million Time Warner Cable customers from Portland, Maine, to Pensacola, Fla., are caught in the middle of the New York company's dust-up over the fees it pays Sinclair Broadcast Group Inc. to include its signals in channel lineups.

However, Time Warner Cable said late Thursday that it will continue to provide all available Big 4 network programming this weekend even if Hunt Valley, Md.-based Sinclair pulls local programming such as the evening news. Such a plan could mean that college football fans may be able to watch Saturday's ABC broadcast of the Florida Gators playing in the Outback bowl after all.

The companies' dispute is the latest of several in the industry this year, some of which resulted in cable customers missing part of the Oscars broadcast and two World Series games. In most cases, however, cable and broadcast companies have been able to avoid blackouts, even if negotiations go down the wire. Earlier Thursday, DirecTV Corp. said it reached a deal with broadcaster Hearst Corp. over the fees the satellite company pays to carry Hearst's 29 local TV stations, averting a blackout. The companies' contract had been scheduled to expire at midnight Friday as well.

Broadcast companies used to allow cable providers to carry their channels for free and made their money selling commercial time. But competition for ad dollars has intensified, and broadcasters now see these fees from cable providers as a crucial, second revenue stream.

Sinclair is asking for more cash for the right to carry signals from its stations, but Time Warner Cable is resisting the increase. The contract affects 33 Sinclair stations in 21 markets.

Time Warner Cable said Thursday that it is still working to reach a long-term agreement with Sinclair. Rob Marcus, the company's president and chief operating officer, said discussions between the Time Warner Cable programming team and Sinclair have taken place "as recently as this morning and are ongoing."

Sinclair Broadcast was not immediately reachable for comment.

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