

BlackBerry blackout looms for millions

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A growing legal quarrel over patent rights could lead to a shutdown of BlackBerry service to millions of subscribers in the United States.

A federal judge could soon order the plug pulled on BlackBerry's popular wireless e-mail service over a patent challenge filed by NTP against Research in Motion, the company that created the handheld device.

The situation heated up further Thursday when software developer Visto licensed NTP's technology and then promptly sued Microsoft over alleged infringement of NTP's patents. Visto is asking a federal judge in Texas to block the introduction of Microsoft's Windows Mobile Direct Push wireless e-mail in the spring.

While the squabbling could result in a judge ordering service cut for more than 3 million U.S. BlackBerry subscribers, a window remains open for an out-of-court settlement that would avoid a BlackBerry blackout.

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