

Telco companies to provide data for broadband map

August 8 2009, By JOELLE TESSLER , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- The country's biggest phone and cable companies have agreed to hand over information about their broadband networks to help the federal government produce a national map showing where high-speed Internet connections are available across the U.S.

AT&T Inc., Verizon Communications Inc. and Comcast Corp. have told the Commerce Department that they are committed to helping the government "complete the important and difficult task of mapping broadband availability."

Trade groups representing a broad cross-section of the telecommunications sector, including wireless carriers, rural phone and [cable companies](#) and the industry giants, are also encouraging their members to cooperate with the Congressionally mandated effort.

"The information that the broadband carriers are now committed to providing is crucial to the creation of the national broadband map," said Lawrence Strickling, head of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, the arm of the Commerce Department that is overseeing the mapping project.

Congress included up to \$350 million in the economic stimulus bill passed in February to develop a "comprehensive nationwide inventory map of existing broadband service capability and availability in the United States."

The NTIA will be awarding grants to entities in each state to gather data on everything from the availability of different broadband technologies to connection speeds at the local level. The data will be used to produce an interactive national broadband map that Americans everywhere can search to find local broadband services. Regulators and lawmakers also plan to use the data to target broadband investments and shape policy to bring affordable high-speed connections to all corners of the country.

Friday's announcement is the product of weeks of talks among the NTIA, telecom carriers, state officials and public interest groups. And it represents an attempt to balance the needs of the NTIA, which wants to collect data that is detailed enough to produce a robust map, and the concerns of the telecom companies, which don't want to be overburdened by impractical data reporting requirements and don't want to make too much sensitive information available to competitors. The carriers pledged their cooperation after the NTIA modified its data requirements to address industry concerns.

In one key change, the agency said it is no longer seeking data showing broadband options at the street-address level and will instead accept data showing availability at the census-block level for more densely populated areas. For less densely populated areas, the agency will accept data showing broadband availability for address ranges in each census block.

Thomas Power, chief of staff for the NTIA, noted that census-block-level data is likely to be more reliable than address-level data since it may not be practical to map broadband to every single address in the country.

The agency also said it is no longer seeking average revenue data, which telecom companies consider to be proprietary. That data also can be difficult to pinpoint when broadband is sold as part of a bundle of telecom services.

Glenn Reynolds, vice president of policy for the U.S. Telecom Association, said the new data requirements will "facilitate the accurate and timely completion of the [broadband](#) map without risking the release of sensitive data."

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