

Fans relieved to be able to watch Outback Bowl

January 2 2011, By DANA WOLLMAN , AP Business Writer

(AP) -- College football fans were elated that they could stay home to watch the Florida Gators play the Penn State Nittany Lions in Saturday's Outback Bowl, after Sinclair Broadcast Group Inc. and two cable TV companies agreed to extend contract talks for two more weeks.

Hunt Valley, Md.-based Sinclair and the two cable providers - [Time Warner Cable](#) Inc. and Bright House Networks - have been locked in an acrimonious tug-of-war over the fees that the cable companies pay to air programs from 33 of Sinclair's television stations. Their previous contract was scheduled to expire at midnight Friday. If the companies hadn't reached a temporary two-week extension late Friday night, local Sinclair stations - including affiliates of NBC, ABC, CBS and Fox - would have been dropped from channel lineups for roughly 4 million Time Warner customers and an unknown number of Bright House subscribers.

Chip Corbin, a Penn State alumnus in Ohio, had planned to go to a sports bar to watch the Outback Bowl if his ABC affiliate had blacked out. Sports bars typically subscribe to satellite services, which are unaffected by the Sinclair dispute.

"It's nice to know that I won't be competing with folks who are going to want to watch different bowl games," said Corbin, 32, an engineer with the Air Force who lives just outside of Dayton in Huber Heights, Ohio. "My whole life has been Penn State football," he said.

Corbin said the comforts of home trumped the possibility of being stuck in a corner of a bar with few people interested in his game.

"I've got my 46-inch, high-definition TV, and I get to make my own chicken wing recipe," Corbin said.

Even if Sinclair hadn't agreed to the extension, Time Warner had said it would have imported broadcast signals from other cities to replace Sinclair stations so that its customers could still enjoy network programming from these four networks. Syndicated shows such as "Seinfeld" could have been moved to different time slots. However, viewers would have lost access to local news and weather.

Bright House added that it, too, would have carried feeds from other cities if its dispute with Sinclair remained unresolved. Those plans would have likely kept the Outback Bowl game on regardless of whether the contract dispute was settled.

This means that even if Sinclair and the two cable companies do not reach an agreement by their new target date of Jan. 14, subscribers will still be able to watch the Golden Globes, which will air on NBC on Jan. 16, as well as ongoing NFL playoff and NHL games.

By making those alternate arrangements, the cable companies put pressure on Sinclair to continue negotiating and possibly reconsider its proposed broadcasting fee hike. Time Warner has been using that same strategy in upstate New York to work around a similar dispute with Smith Media. Viewers still get prime-time shows and other national programming but their local newscasts come from other markets.

Bruce Leichtman, industry analyst and president of Leichtman Research Group, said this tactic has left Sinclair with less leverage, and may force the company to lower its demands.

"If they can put on the same network from another city it would take away a lot of negotiating because all people would lose is the local news," he said. "The broadcaster would lose pretty much everything."

However, the workaround is not a permanent solution. Under original contract terms with Sinclair, New York-based Time Warner could only replace Sinclair stations with [broadcast signals](#) from other cities until late February, around the time the Oscars are scheduled to air on ABC. It's unclear how long Bright House has permission to do the same, or if the two-week extension now pushes that end-date into March.

The dust-up is just the latest in a string of disputes between cable companies and broadcasters. Last March, Cablevision Corp. subscribers in New York lost their ABC station in the hours leading up to the Oscars, and missed the first 15 minutes of the awards show before the company hammered out a last-minute deal. And in October, Cablevision Corp. customers went without programming for 15 days, a loss that caused sports fans to miss two World Series games.

Bright House customer Shane Wiley of Pensacola, Fla., said Saturday that while the extension means he can watch today's game, it doesn't necessarily mean he will continue his cable subscription. He said this week's dispute is the second or third time in the last several years that he's faced losing local news from Pensacola.

But with Bright House being the only cable provider in his part of the Florida Panhandle, his options have been limited when he finds himself caught in the middle of Bright House's disputes with broadcasters.

"We were going to go over to satellite (TV) because of that," he said. "We still might. We have to have channel 3 for the local news, so (any interruption) is not going to work real well."

Associated Press writers Jennifer Kay in Miami and Ann Sanner in Columbus, Ohio contributed to this report.

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