



FCC proposes nationwide free super Wi-Fi networks

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WASHINGTON -- The federal government wants to create super Wi-Fi networks across the nation, so powerful and broad in reach that consumers could use them to make calls or surf the Internet without paying a cellphone bill every month.

The proposal from the Federal Communications Commission has rattled the \$178 billion wireless industry, which has launched a fierce lobbying effort to persuade policy makers to reconsider the idea, analysts say.

That has been countered by an equally intense campaign from Google, Microsoft and other tech giants who say free-for-all Wi-Fi service would spark an explosion of innovations and devices that would benefit most Americans, especially the poor.

The airwaves that FCC officials want to hand over to the public would be much more powerful than existing Wi-Fi networks that have become common in households. They could penetrate thick concrete walls and travel over hills and around trees. If all goes as planned, free access to the Web would be available in just about every metropolitan area and many rural areas.

The new Wi-Fi networks would also have a much farther reach, allowing for a driverless car to communicate to another vehicle a mile away or a patient's heart monitor to connect to a hospital on the other side of town.

If approved by the FCC, the free networks would still take several years to set up. And, with no one actively managing them, connections could easily become jammed in major cities. But public Wi-Fi could allow many consumers to make free calls from their mobile phones via the Internet. The frugal-

minded could even use the service in their homes, allowing them to cut off expensive Internet bills.

"For a casual user of the Web, perhaps, this could replace carrier service," said Jeffrey Silva, an analyst at the Medley Global Advisors research firm. "Because it is more plentiful and there is no price tag, it could have a real appeal to some people."

Designed by FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski, the plan would be a global first. When the U.S. government made a limited amount of unlicensed airwaves available in 1985, an unexpected explosion in innovation followed. Baby monitors, garage-door openers and wireless stage microphones were created. Millions of homes now run their own wireless networks, connecting tablets, game consoles, kitchen appliances and security systems to the Internet.

"Freeing up unlicensed spectrum is a vibrantly free-market approach that offers low barriers to entry to innovators developing the technologies of the future and benefits consumers," Genachowski said in an e-mailed statement.

Some companies and local cities are already moving in this direction. Google is providing free Wi-Fi to the public in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan and parts of Silicon Valley.

Cities support the idea because the networks would lower costs for schools and businesses or help vacationers easily find tourist spots. Consumer advocates note the benefits to the poor, who often cannot afford expensive cellphone and Internet bills.

The proposal would require local television stations and other broadcasters to sell a chunk of airwaves to the government that would be used for the public Wi-Fi networks. It is not clear whether these companies would be willing to do so.

The FCC's plan is part of a broader strategy to repurpose entire swaths of the nation's airwaves to accomplish a number of goals, including bolstering cellular networks and creating a dedicated channel for emergency responders.

Some Republican lawmakers have criticized Genachowski for his idea of creating free Wi-Fi networks, noting that an auction of the airwaves would raise billions for the U.S. Treasury.

That sentiment echoes arguments made by companies such as AT&T, T-Mobile, Verizon Wireless, Intel and Qualcomm, which wrote in a letter to FCC staff late last month that the government should focus its attention on selling the airwaves to businesses.

Some of these companies also cautioned that a free Wi-Fi service could interfere with existing cellular networks and television broadcasts. Intel, whose chips are used in many of the devices that operate on cellular networks, fears that the new Wi-Fi service would crowd the airwaves. The company said it would rather that the FCC use the airwaves from television stations to bolster high-speed cellular networks, known as 4G.

"We think that that spectrum would be most useful to the larger society and to broadband deployment

if it were licensed,” said Peter Pitsch, executive director of communications for Intel. “As unlicensed, there would be a disincentive to invest in expensive networking equipment and provide users with optimal quality of service.”

Cisco and other telecommunications-equipment firms told the FCC that it needs to test the airwaves more for potential interference.

“Cisco strongly urges the commission to firmly retreat from the notion that it can predict, or should predict ... how the unlicensed guard bands might be used,” the networking giant wrote.

Supporters of the free-Wi-Fi plan say telecom-equipment firms have long enjoyed lucrative relationships with cellular carriers and may not want to disrupt that model.

An FCC official added that there is little proof so far that the spectrum that could be used for public Wi-Fi systems would knock out broadcast and 4G wireless signals.