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FCCs Martin proposes changes to broadband data collection

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WASHINGTON (Dow Jones)--Federal Communications Commission Chairman Kevin Martin has proposed a series of changes aimed at improving the level of information the agency collects about broadband Internet deployment across the U.S.

In a bid to answer critics who allege the agency hasn't done enough to promote broadband deployment, Martin has circulated a series of reforms to the other four FCC panel members to change the way broadband Internet data is collected, and what speeds of service constitute broadband Internet access.

"It's important for us to try and get an even clearer picture of exactly how broadband is rolling out in the country," said Martin. "Whenever we're able to gather more information, it will help to inform our decision making."

The proposals come as the FCC releases its latest figures on the numbers of broadband connections in the U.S. As of the end of 2006, the agency said there were 82.5 million total broadband connections, with 58.2 million of these residential connections.

Over the course of 2006, the numbers show a 61% increase from 51.2 million connections at the end of 2005.

Currently, the FCC measures broadband availability on a per-Zip Code basis - if one household in a Zip Code has a high-speed Internet connection, that area is deemed to be serviced from a regulatory point of view.

That has been lambasted by critics as an outdated and nonrepresentative way to measure availability.

The proposed new data-collection method will likely be welcomed on Capitol Hill. There are bills in both the House and the Senate that would direct the FCC to conduct a comprehensive national survey of where service is and what kinds of broadband service is available.

Martin's plan wouldn't go as far as these bills have called for, but they may go some way to silence lawmakers, who have been vocal in their criticism of the FCC.

"This will allow us to calculate broadband subscription at a much more granular level rather than the state level we are able to currently," said Derek Turner, research director at Free Press, the public-interest group.

Martin's proposal would see the FCC begin asking Internet service providers how many customers in each Zip Code have service.

The next step will be to measure the number of subscribers in nine-digit Zip codes from the five-digit Zip Codes that are used at the moment, which are smaller geographic areas.

Free Press had been lobbying the FCC to make these changes. It has argued that it will enable policy decisions to be based on a more accurate picture of what is happening in the market.

Another claim made by critics of U.S. broadband policy is that the speed of what is called broadband in this country pales in comparison to speeds available elsewhere in the world.

"Everybody would agree that the current system is really bad for a lot of different reasons," said Larry Spiwak, of the free-market think tank Phoenix Center.

At a time when consumers are demanding more bandwidth intensive content like video and music, the speed the FCC classifies as broadband is out of touch with these modern demands, critics claim.

The FCC defines broadband as any service 200 kilobits per second or faster. By comparison, the typical dial-up telephone connection is 56 kilobits.

It will now move to a tiered system with five different levels of service.

Anything between 200 kilobits and 768 kilobits per second will be considered first-generation broadband.

From 768 kilobits to 1.5 megabits is to be considered basic broadband. This is the range that most basic DSL service from telephone companies starts in.

In between 1.5 megabits and 3 megabits a second will be classified as high-speed service, between 3 megabits and 6 megabits called robust service and anything over 6 megabits a second called premium.

This highest category is where premium service from the likes of Comcast Corp. ([CMCSA](#)) and Verizon Communications Inc. ([VZ](#)) through its FiOS product is located.

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