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Cable prices might not fall for all

WASHINGTON (AP) — Consumers demanded it, the Federal Communications Commission ordered it, but that's still no guarantee that bills for cable are about to fall.

The FCC decreed a cut in February, saying it would "bring prices down another 7 percent." But there's no guarantee that's what subscribers will see when the change is finally implemented.

That's because the FCC hasn't spelled out the formula that cable companies and local regulators must use to figure new rates. Additionally, rates depend on which services each subscriber takes.

The formula is contained in a rate order that the FCC is expected to issue this week. It is long overdue.

With so many details still in the air, cable companies have been thrown into chaos. Millions of dollars are at stake. Their bankers are jittery. And local regulatory authorities worry about what the new rules will do for consumers.

David Olson, director of the Portland, Ore., Office of Cable Communications and Franchise Management, said he doesn't expect all 140,000 cable subscribers in his city to receive a 7 percent reduction, no matter what the FCC said in its February announcement.

"The press releases announcing what the FCC is going to do (do) not always have a one-to-one relationship to reality," he said.

He noted that the FCC's first set of cable regulations, issued almost a year ago, sometimes resulted in rate increases, not cuts. That won't happen this time, local regulators predict.

At the time, the FCC predicted bills for two-thirds of all cable subscribers would drop by as much as 10 percent.

Sixty-eight percent did, but — to the FCC's surprise and Congress' dismay — 31 percent of consumers got increases.

This prompted demands that the FCC revisit the rules. It did so, last month.

Susan Herman, general manager of Los Angeles' Department of Telecommunications, said she is uncertain about the impact on the 520,000 subscribers she oversees. And New York state cable regulator William Finneran, who oversees 3.9 million cable customers, shied away from predicting the outcome.

But Bill Squadron, president of a local regulators' lobby group called the National Association of Telecommunications Officers and Advisors,

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— David Olson,
director, Office of Cable Communications
and Franchise Management

predicted "a significant percentage of consumers will see rates go down."

If the new FCC rules come out soon, Herman thinks consumers could see a drop in their bills by late summer or early fall. Olson thinks December is a surer bet.

And some consumers may have to wait longer. If cable systems appeal local rate decisions, the new rates won't take effect until the disputes are resolved.

Basic cable rates are regulated by cities, not the FCC, but they use the FCC's formula. The FCC regulates rates beyond the basic package only if consumers file complaints.

The new rules mean more work, cable executives and local regulators said. Whether more work translates into a longer wait for consumers depends on the resources of local regulators.

"We essentially have to redo what we've already done," said Mike Isaacs, governmental affairs director of the Providence Journal Co., which operates cable systems in nine states, serving 800,000 subscribers.

FCC officials predict the new rules will take effect in mid-May, dovetailing with May 15, the day when a freeze on cable revenues will be lifted.

Under the freeze, in effect nearly a year, cable rates can move up or down, but a system's monthly revenue has to stay the same. Cable companies say the freeze has cost them millions of dollars.

Most rate increases the first time around came from systems rearranging packages of programming and equipment to comply with the FCC's price rules, regulators said. Local regulators view those changes as a one-time occurrence.

While many of those increases were legitimate, the FCC is investigating 62 cable systems that may have violated the regulations.

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