

OPEN INTERNET: WHAT IS IT AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR RURAL BROADBAND?

If you follow press reports or telecom-specific industry news at all, there would appear to be no controversy about an “open Internet”—everyone claims to be for it. But when one gets into the weeds of how that actually happens, there hasn’t been a more hotly contested telecom-related issue.

With the FCC’s recent vote to impose strong, specific rules related to net neutrality, you are likely seeing opposing claims that these rules are either “the problem rather than the solution” or just the steps needed to police conduct that might undermine an open Internet in the future. Given the intensity of arguments and claims on both sides of the debate, this fact sheet attempts to explain what’s at issue and the impacts, if any, on rural consumers of broadband.

- ***What is an “open Internet”?***

There are any number of definitions of an open Internet” out there. The very basic premise is that ISPs should not interfere with a consumer’s access to content or data of his or her choosing. As noted above, however, complex questions related to how our country can best achieve this goal and what exceptions might be required to allow for reasonable management of broadband networks lead to all sorts of debates, conflicts and confusion.

- ***Was the Internet “closed” before these rules were adopted?***

No. There are very few instances of ISPs ever being accused of blocking or throttling data on their networks, and most of these examples are years old and involve larger ISPs in disputes with specific content providers. In many ways, the FCC’s order appears to be more about preventing what it perceives as potential bad behavior in the future than it is about correcting bad behavior that occurred in the past.

- ***Will a consumer see any change in his or her Internet service as a result of this order?***

No—at least not immediately. Again, there have been very few allegations in the past involving open Internet concerns, and nearly every ISP has run its network and services to fulfill consumer broadband demand to the maximum extent practicable. The order shouldn’t result in near-term changes in terms of what content a consumer can see on the Internet or the speeds at which content is delivered. But it’s still possible that some of the rules could over time have unforeseen effects on ISPs, their networks and consumers’ services, and lead to some changes in either how services must be provided and/or the consumer experience.

- ***Is there anything in this order that might be of special interest to rural broadband consumers?***

In the near term, the order appears to treat all consumers—rural and urban—largely the same in terms of the policies being adopted. But some of the reasoning used by the FCC to reach its decision could affect future debates that are important to rural consumers. Specifically, small rural ISPs often depend upon interconnection with larger providers to take data “to and from the Internet,” and many small rural ISPs also rely upon universal service support to deploy and operate the broadband-capable networks that make Internet access possible in rural areas. While the commission’s order may not directly address these issues, the order appears to provide at least a foundation for future action on these issues in a way that could promote the affordability and sustainability of rural broadband.