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Today's News

CELL JAMMING EQUIPMENT MAKER plans more demonstrations at prisons in other states after what it calls successful test in South Carolina Friday. (P. 1)

MORE TELECOM LEGISLATION expected in new Congress, with Commerce Committee shake-up to shape agenda. Net neutrality, broadband top priorities. (P. 2)

GONZALEZ 'BURROWING', getting bureau job while Martin's chief of staff. Tate aides have hard time getting bureau slots. (P. 4)

LICENSING REVERSE BAND could solve satellite broadband shortage, says Spectrum Five, one of six applicants. (P. 5)

NO IN-FLIGHT VOIP on Virgin America planes, airline says, but Aircell eyes national coverage. (P. 6)

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Cell Jamming Company Plans Series of Demonstrations Across the U.S.

CellAntenna conducted what it said was the first test of cell jamming equipment Friday at a U.S. state prison at the Lieber Correctional Institution in South Carolina. CellAntenna CEO Howard Melamed told us Monday that more tests are planned in other states, starting with Texas.

Melamed said his company will ask Congress next year to approve legislation clearing the way for companies like his to sell the equipment to other prisons nationwide. Melamed said he had been on the phone Monday with about a dozen congressional offices explaining the technology. Among the witnesses of Friday's demo was a staffer for Sen. Jim DeMint, R.-S.C. "When the cat's out of the bag, you've got a wave of people locking onto it and finding out how big the problem is and how shocking," Melamed said.

Corrections officials in other states, including Arkansas, Tennessee and North Carolina, have expressed interest in similar demonstrations, Melamed said. "We're hoping to do this demonstration across the country," he said. "If the FCC asks me to do a test I will show them the same thing."

CTIA President Steve Largent called South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford (R) asking him to scuttle the test, sources said. "The wireless industry would like more than anything to prevent incarcerated individuals from making wireless calls. However, the use of jammers is both unlawful and wrong-headed," the CTIA said in a statement Monday. "CellAntenna has blatantly violated a federal law and they should suffer the consequences." Numerous "legal" alternatives are available to prisons, "including cellphone sniffing dogs, cellphone detection and location technologies, and other measures," said the CTIA.

During Friday's test, Melamed flipped a switch on a box the size of a briefcase in an auditorium at the prison, killing all cell signals inside the room, though people could still make calls in the hallway, according to press accounts. Melamed also demonstrated that the radios carried by guards were not affected.

Melamed said CellAntenna sells the equipment to prison systems around the world but cannot do so in the U.S., though he said in-prison cellphones are a major problem in the country. South Carolina officials say they confiscate more than 1,000 handsets per year in one prison alone, he said. A phone sells for \$500 to \$700 on the black market inside most prisons and is used on average by more than 50 inmates, he said. Because of their value, inmates have gone to great lengths to import them, even having outsiders launch them over prison walls.

Melamed countered CTIA arguments that jammers could affect cellphone use outside prison walls, saying the technology is surgical (CD Nov 21 p5). "I don't know which engineers they have working for them [at the CTIA] but they didn't go to the same schools I went to," he said. "We know precisely how to stop signals at the wall. We do it constantly. It's unbelievable they would provide such misinformation to the public."

Melamed also said searching for handsets is often difficult, since they're sometimes smuggled in body cavities. Training guards or bringing in specially trained dogs to sniff for phones is expensive and requires "invasive" examinations of prisoners, he said.

Meanwhile, Melamed urged the FCC to seek comment on a petition the company filed in June 2007 asking the agency to change its rules to allow state and local law enforcement to employ jamming equipment to disarm and disable remotely controlled improvised explosive devices. "Recognizing that the responsible use of RF jamming devices is an effective tool in the fight against Terrorism, several state and local law enforcement agencies have contacted the Petitioner to explore the purchase of RF jamming devices for law enforcement purposes," the petition said. -- Howard Buskirk

'Unique Opportunity'

Telecom Legislation to Get Higher Profile in New Congress

With strengthened Democratic majorities, Congress may move quickly on telecom issues such as broadband, net neutrality and media ownership, speakers said Monday at a Pike & Fischer conference. Many Democratic lawmakers view the new Congress as a "unique opportunity," said e-Copernicus President Greg Rohde, a former Clinton administration official and Senate staffer. Members have told him the combination of a Democratic White House and a potentially filibuster-proof Democratic Congress "creates a new dynamic," Rohde said.

Changes in House and Senate Commerce Committee leaders also could signal increased telecom activity on the Hill, Rohde said. President-elect Barack Obama's focus on increasing broadband deployment will stimulate activity and could be included in the economic stimulus package that Congress takes up, said Gloria Tristani, a former Democratic FCC commissioner. Congress will take a more active role in net neutrality and media legislation, she predicted. Rohde said public broadcasting will find a more favorable climate in the new Congress.

But one concern is whether Congress would eye spectrum auction revenue as it grapples with soaring budget deficits, Rohde said. It won't take long before budget pressures force lawmakers to look at solutions. "We need to ask what the role of telecom policy should be in an era of budget cutting," he said. Much of existing spectrum policy has come about because Congress eyed sales as a way to generate budget income, Rohde said. "Budgeteers have not forgotten that and may revisit it."