

California carriers given more time to come through on PUC provisions

PUC anticipating rehearing request

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The state Public Utilities Commission has granted delays to a handful of carriers in Phase 1 of its Final Decision that established more requirements intended to improve telephone service in rural counties, including Mendocino.

PUC Executive Director Timothy J. Sullivan on Monday wrote letters to AT&T, Charter and Time Warner Cable, Frontier and MCI metro Access Transmission Services, owned by Verizon, granting an extension until June 1 to deliver on certain actions ordered by the Final Decision. The carriers had asked to be given until June 30 to comply with seven orders in the decision, including

one to respond to data requests regarding gaps between attempted and completed calls to or from California by March 31 and one to submit itemized reports of call completion problems on a quarterly basis by April 1.

Cox was granted an extension until March 1 to follow orders to help customers with Multi-Line Telephone Systems enable or opt out of short code access, a service that lets people text a short number to, say, vote for their favorite singer on a reality competition show or donate to charity. Those provisions, also named in the other carriers' extension agreements, had an original deadline of Feb. 3.

The language in Sullivan's letters is vague, stating as "reasonable" the carriers' claims that they needed the extensions to meet with certain staff members and government groups, like the California Office of Emergency Services, leaving out specifics like when they will meet or what they will discuss. Frontier claimed it needed more time because its resources had been focused on customer service issues brought on by recent storms. More significant than meetings and resources, though, is the intent of at least two carriers, MCI and Frontier, to use the time granted in the extension to jointly apply for a rehearing of the decision, based on "alleged ambiguities..as well as other legal issues." Details on those ambiguities are presumably forthcoming in a request for rehearing.

A rehearing, predicted by Broadband Alliance of Mendocino County Chairwoman Trish Steel, would threaten to roll back what she previously called a "significant victory for rural counties," throwing out the regulations imposed on the carriers by the PUC.

"This just means that we have to get prepared for the bigger fight to prevent the entire ruling to get overturned," Steel said in an email.

When asked about the request for delays before they were granted, an AT&T spokesperson said in an email, "Our request for an extension is part of our good faith effort to comply with the Commission's directives, and to best serve our customers. The CPUC's order called for further collaboration to address unresolved issues,

many of which impact customers. AT&T along with others in the industry have requested a time extension to work with CPUC Staff, Cal OES offices, carriers and other stakeholders to ensure this is implemented thoughtfully.”

The letter to AT&T did not mention an involvement with the rehearing request.

This action, combined with the expected rehearing, leaves the state of regulatory control that the PUC has over these carriers in limbo, particularly in regard to reporting outages in rural or underserved areas. But as of now, the carriers are still expected to complete the remaining Phase 1 provisions by June 1.

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