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PSC ADOPTS EMERGENCY ANTI-SLAMMING RULES

The state Public Service Commission voted Tuesday to adopt rules on an emergency basis to provide more protections against telephone slamming that might occur now that many Montana consumers are able to choose their local long-distance carrier as well as their interstate long-distance company. Slamming is the unauthorized change of a customer's telephone carrier.

The PSC delayed the effective date of the rules until March 11 to give telephone carriers time to bring their marketing forms and scripts into compliance.

US West Communications asked the PSC to adopt the rules, which mirror the Federal Communications Commission's new verification procedures to confirm customers' decisions to switch carriers that must be followed by telephone companies. The FCC rules will not take effect for about 3 months, however. US West argued the Montana PSC should put them into place immediately because the incidence of slamming could increase now that a new element of telephone long-distance competition in Montana called intraLATA dialing parity has been implemented for US West's customers.

LATAs (local access and transport areas) were created after the breakup of AT&T in the 1980s to mark the boundaries within which the former Bell companies like US West could transport long-distance calls. Montana is divided into an eastern and western LATA in which calls placed in the same LATA are intraLATA calls while calls placed between LATAs or outside of Montana are interLATA calls. For example, a call from Helena to Missoula is an intraLATA call while a call from Helena to Billings or Helena to Chicago is an interLATA call. It used to be that long-distance calls placed by dialing "1" plus the area code and telephone number that originate and terminate in the same LATA were carried by US West. If a person wanted to use another carrier for such an intraLATA long-distance call, he or she would first dial the several extra digits that make up the preferred carrier's access code.

As of February 4, US West customers may now pre-select their intraLATA long-distance carrier and use that carrier for these calls on a "1-plus" basis, without having to dial an access code. Just as customers already choose a carrier for their other long-distance calls, they are able to select an intraLATA carrier and do not have to dial extra digits to access that carrier.

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Key provisions of the new rules include the following:

- A telephone company that sells more than one type of telephone service, such as interstate and interLATA long-distance, must obtain separate authorizations from the customer to switch each type of service.

- A local telephone company like US West that executes customers' carrier change requests that are submitted by other telephone carriers may not contact the customer to verify the customer's decision to switch carriers.
- A local telephone company that offers preferred carrier "freezes," which customers can request to prevent unauthorized carrier switches on their accounts, must explain what types of telephone service are subject to a freeze and obtain separate authorizations from the customer for each type of service which is frozen. In addition, local phone companies must remove a preferred carrier freeze upon a customer's written or verbal request.

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