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Comcast to limit Internet users to 250 gigabytes

Downloading restrictions are aimed at residential customers

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Comcast Corp. says less than 1 percent of its customers will be affected by a newly set limit on Internet use, but local observers say the move is another sign the way most people pay to get online will change.

Comcast, which serves the Springfield market and is the nation's second-largest Internet provider, announced this week that beginning Oct. 1, it will limit residential customers to downloading and uploading 250 gigabytes of data per month.

The company said 250 GB equals downloading about 62,500 songs, 125 standard-definition movies or 25,000 high-resolution photos.

The limit, which does not affect business service plans, far exceeds 2 to 3 GB, the median amount used by Comcast customers.

Comcast says curbing the top users is necessary to keep the network fast for other users. The company in the past has had policies against "excessive" use, but this is the first time a specific limit has been set. Users who chronically exceed 250 GB may be notified and eventually cut off.

"This announcement will not be relevant to more than 99 percent of all of our customers," Charlie Douglas, a Comcast spokesman, said Friday. "It really is just focused on a very tiny, tiny user base that uses a massively disproportionate amount of data."

That tiny user base is often referred to as "bandwidth hogs," people typically involved in frequent online sharing of large movie or music files or are heavy consumers of high-quality online video or gaming programs.

They emerged thanks to the popularity of flat-fee, unlimited online access packages and ever-improving technology.

Keith Miller, a computer science professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield, said Comcast's move might signal a larger movement back to online packages with data limits.

That's how several companies sold Internet service when it was first widely offered to the public in the 1990s. The growing popularity among average customers of high-data tools such as Internet telephone and video conferencing also may hasten the change.

"Maybe somebody will come up with (a system) where they can still make a profit and let users do anything they want," Miller said. "But right now I don't see anyone stepping up to the plate and saying that."

While Comcast's decision made nationwide headlines, other Internet providers — such as Springfield-based Springnet1 Inc. — already have limits.

Neal Miller, Springnet1's president, said his firm's limits went into place about eight years ago. Residential customers can choose wireless-access plans that offer up to 4 or 8 GB. He said Comcast's move isn't surprising, and he expects the company will eventually decrease the limit from 250 GB and perhaps start charging for overuse.

"It's clear to me that's where the business model has to move because bandwidth is a limited resource," he said.

AT&T, another high-speed Internet service provider in Springfield, does not have a limit, but a pricing structure based on data-transfer totals is "inevitable," said spokeswoman Meghan Roskopf.

A representative of a consumer advocacy group criticized Comcast's decision, saying the company should focus on improving its network, not imposing restrictions.

"The company had the choice of expanding capacity or degrading service, and they chose to degrade service," said Jim Chilsen, spokesman for the Citizens Utility Board of Illinois. "This is the kind of thing that happens in the world of a duopoly."

"I don't want to make it sound like this is impending disaster, but at the same time it's a disturbing trend. I think ... everyday consumers would like very profitable companies like Comcast and AT&T to spend more time thinking about how we can make Internet service more accessible to people and

faster.”

Comcast’s Douglas responded, however, that by managing extreme users’ activity, they are making sure others don’t experience slow speeds. He also said Comcast is constantly expanding its capacity.

The Associated Press contributed to this report. Jason Piscia can be reached at 788-1401.

Bandwidth hog?

Comcast does not offer anything to measure monthly bandwidth use. The company suggests searching the Internet for “bandwidth meter,” which will provide options for installing a tool on your computer. Customers using multiple computers on the same Internet account will need to measure downloading and uploading on each machine to calculate total bandwidth use.

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