Report: FCC, U.S. Operators Close on Phone Unlocking Deal

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Following a year's worth of dustups, the FCC and the major U.S. wireless providers are close to a new set of policies for phone unlocking.

Reuters reports [1] that the deal would ensure carriers notify their customers—via text, email—when devices are able to be unlocked following contract periods. The new policies may cover prepaid devices as well. In addition, carriers would be expected to confirm or deny unlocking requests within two days.

AT&T, Verizon, Sprint and T-Mobile already have unlocking procedures in place but ideally, these policies would provide process continuity across the industry.

The current argument over phone unlocking began last January when the Library of Congress updates the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, effectively making phone unlocking illegal. CTIA, which represents the major carriers, backed the decision saying that it helped prohibit massive trading of unlocked devices on the black market.

But consumers responded with outrage and an online petition that garnered more than 100,000 signatures and landed on the President's desk.

When Tom Wheeler took over as FCC Chairman earlier this year, one of his first acts was to address the urgency for a phone unlocking agreement in a letter to CTIA [2]. He reinforced the need for carriers to be forthright and notify customers as soon as their devices became eligible for unlocking.

"Absent the consumer's right to be informed about unlocking eligibility, any

voluntary program would be a hollow shell," Wheeler wrote in the letter.

The FCC plans to address phone unlocking during its open commission meeting Thursday [3].

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