Telecoms agree to provide services to competitors' customers during outages

By IRENE GALEA
Staff

Twelve of Canada’s telephone and internet service providers have signed an agreement to share network services in the case of a major outage, and are expected to bear the costs of any changes necessary to carry out the deal, federal Industry Minister François-Philippe Champagne said Wednesday.

The formal deal would allow a company experiencing a major service interruption to temporarily serve its customers using its competitors' networks. The agreement will replace an informal set of arrangements between some companies, and ensure that the mutual assistance is enforceable by law.

The new agreement is a response to the Rogers outage in July, which interrupted cellphone and internet services for millions of Canadians and shut down digital infrastructure such as the Interac banking system. Following the outage, Mr. Champagne asked telecom companies to reach a formal deal within 60 days.

Mr. Champagne said during a news conference that the measures will make sure companies are held accountable when network outages occur.

"As of Sept. 9, should one of these providers be faced with a major network outage, the other companies have committed to provide the support and assistance necessary so that Canadians can reach loved ones, access 911 and conduct business transactions," Mr. Champagne said.

The minister said he expects the companies to shoulder the costs of upgrading their networks in accordance with the agreement, and said he "will be watching like a hawk" for attempts to pass those expenses on to consumers. "I think there is an understanding that this could have happened to another carrier. For me, this is like an insurance policy for all of them to work better together," he said.

Industry experts say the agreement is not a substitute for addressing the regulatory gaps the Rogers outage revealed. According to Michael Geist, who is the Canada Research Chair in internet and e-commerce law at the University of Ottawa, the outage demonstrated a clear need for stronger consumer protection rules, including standards for compensating customers when outages happen.

"It also highlighted the need to emphasize competition, and for a CRTC that prioritizes the public interest," Prof. Geist said, referring to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, which regulates the industry.

"Today's announcement does not further those aims, which have taken a hit in recent days with further industry consolidation."

Among the 12 signatories are Rogers Communications Inc., Bell Canada, Telus Communications Inc., Shaw Communications Inc., Freedom Mobile Inc. and Cogeco Communications Inc.

The deal includes an "emergency roaming protocol" that will ensure that mobile customers are able to roam onto other networks in the case of an outage. The measure would prevent affected customers from losing access to important services. According to documents
Rogers filed with the CRTC after the July outage, the number of emergency calls that were successfully routed through the company's network during the service interruption was 40 per cent lower than average - suggesting many Canadians were unable to access 911 immediately.

In another set of documents submitted to the CRTC, Rogers said it had not been able to transfer millions of customers to its rivals' networks during the outage - despite offers of assistance - because certain elements of its network, including its centralized user database, were inaccessible at the time.

A "mutual assistance protocol" to be implemented under the new deal will provide measures for the temporary sharing of other resources between telecom companies, including staff, vehicles, equipment and wireless spectrum.

And an "emergency network outage communications protocol" outlined in the deal is intended to ensure that telecoms provide timely and clear information about outages to the public, and to government authorities. Rogers was criticized after the July outage for being slow to communicate with its customers.

"I don't think it should be the minister trying to reach the CEO of a telecom company when you have a major outage in the country. I think it should be the other way around," Mr. Champagne said.

The minister said he has given the Canadian Security Telecommunications Advisory Committee, which is composed of government and industry leaders, six months to come up with further measures to ensure reliable telecommunications services.