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Traffic Crawls on US Information Superhighway

By Elise Ackerman

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The average download speed in the U.S. is 1.97 megabits per second -- far slower than the 61-megabits-per-second average download speed in Japan, according to a recent study by the Communications Workers of America. California's Internet is particularly slow, and Alaska has the slowest Internet in the country, the study finds.

You have more to complain about when it comes to your Internet connection than you realized.

The first nationwide study of Internet speeds not only uncovered sluggish connections from California to New Hampshire, it also revealed that the United States lags far behind other countries in the world.

According to the Communications Workers of America, which measured the connection speeds for 80,000 broadband users between September 2006 and May 2007, the average download speed in the United States is 1.97 megabits per second (mps), compared to 61 megabits per second for Japan, about 45 mps for South Korea and 17 mps for France.

Not Fast Enough

Larry Cohen, president of the CWA, said "speed defines what is possible on the Internet." Cohen said U.S. speeds are not fast enough to permit interactive home-based medical monitoring, multimedia distance learning or data-intensive business services .

The study found California's Internet to be particularly slow, with median download speeds of 1.52 mps, and a ranking of 36 out of 51.

The slowest Internet was found in Alaska, which had a median download speed of 545 kilobits per second. The fastest Internet was in Rhode Island, where the median download speed is 5 mps.

Cohen said the union, which is made up of large numbers of employees of telecommunications companies, is calling on Washington to adopt a comprehensive broadband policy with the goal of providing all U.S. Internet users with download speeds of 10 mps and upload speeds of 1 mps by 2010.

Increasing Broadband Availability

The goal is modest compared with Japan, which aims to provide an Internet with speeds of 100 mps to every house by 2010.

Brian Mefford, chief executive of ConnectKentucky, a nonprofit consortium of telecommunications companies and local groups, said his state dramatically increased broadband availability from 60 percent to 93 percent in just three years by working with telecommunications companies to increase coverage and with a myriad of local stakeholders -- from business groups to school districts and health care providers -- to find ways to take advantage of the new services.

The effort cost about US\$7 million and led to 14,500 new technology jobs.

H. Gordon Diamond, a spokesperson for AT&T (NYSE: T), the country's largest telecommunications company in terms of subscribers, said AT&T "is committed to making affordable broadband service widely available to consumers throughout our 22-state territory," and he commended the CWA for calling attention to the issue.

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