

(iii) The price of the tiers. A subscriber may not be charged for an NPT unless the cable operator has obtained the subscriber's affirmative consent. Changes to the fundamental nature of an NPT must be approved by subscribers in accordance with § 76.981.

(4) Operators may not require the subscription to any tier, other than a BST, as a condition for subscribing to an NPT and operators may not require subscription to an NPT as a condition for subscribing to a CPST. These restrictions will not apply to cable operators prior to October 5, 2002, if such operators lack the capacity to offer BSTs and NPTs without also providing other intermediate tiers of service as provided in § 76.900(c).

(c) Operators may offer the same service on NPTs as are on one or more BSTs or CPSTs. A channel that occupied a CPST or BST part-time on September 30, 1994 also may be offered full-time on an NPT as long as it continues to be offered at least part-time on CPST or BST, under substantially the same conditions as before it was offered on the NPT. If a channel occupies a BST or CPST (regulated pursuant to § 76.922) full-time on September 30, 1994, and is subsequently reduced to part-time on the BST or CPST, that channel may not be offered on an NPT full-time. Operators that offer a channel both on an NPT and a BST or CPST will have a continuing obligation to ensure that subscribers are aware that the channels are available on the CPST or BST.

(d) Operators may temporarily place new channels on CPSTs for marketing purposes and then move them to NPTs. In order for an operator to move a channel from a CPST to an NPT pursuant to this paragraph, the channel must not have been offered on a BST or CPST prior to October 1, 1994.

(e) After initially electing to offer an NPT, a cable operator may cease to provide the NPT, upon proper notice to subscribers pursuant to § 76.1603. If an operator drops an NPT and subsequently determines to reestablish that tier, at the time of the reestablishment it must comply with the conditions for offering NPTs set forth in paragraph (b) of this section.

(f) If the Commission receives a complaint about an NPT, the operator need not file the rate justification provided in § 76.956, but shall within the time period provided by that rule file documentation that the NPT meets all the conditions set forth in this section.

NOTE 1 TO § 76.987: Cable operators offering a NPT must comply with the notice requirement of § 76.1605.

[59 FR 62625, Dec. 6, 1994, as amended at 65 FR 53617, Sept. 5, 2000]

§ 76.990 Small cable operators.

(a) Effective February 8, 1996, a small cable operator is exempt from rate regulation on its cable programming services tier, or on its basic service tier if that tier was the only service tier subject to rate regulation as of December 31, 1994, in any franchise area in which that operator services 50,000 or fewer subscribers.

(b) *Procedures.* (1) A small cable operator, may certify in writing to its franchise authority at any time that it meets all criteria necessary to qualify as a small operator. Upon request of the local franchising authority, the operator shall identify in writing all of its affiliates that provide cable service, the total subscriber base of itself and each affiliate, and the aggregate gross revenues of its cable and non-cable affiliates. Within 90 days of receiving the original certification, the local franchising authority shall determine whether the operator qualifies for deregulation and shall notify the operator in writing of its decision, although this 90-day period shall be tolled for so long as it takes the operator to respond to a proper request for information by the local franchising authority. An operator may appeal to the Commission a local franchise authority's information request if the operator seeks to challenge the information request as unduly or unreasonably burdensome. If the local franchising authority finds that the operator does not qualify for deregulation, its notice shall state the grounds for that decision. The operator may appeal the local franchising authority's decision to the Commission within 30 days.

(2) Once the operator has certified its eligibility for deregulation on the basic

service tier, the local franchising authority shall not prohibit the operator from taking a rate increase and shall not order the operator to make any refunds unless and until the local franchising authority has rejected the certification in a final order that is no longer subject to appeal or that the Commission has affirmed. The operator shall be liable for refunds for revenues gained (beyond revenues that could be gained under regulation) as a result of any rate increase taken during the period in which it claimed to be deregulated, plus interest, in the event the operator is later found not to be deregulated. The one-year limitation on refund liability will not be applicable during that period to ensure that the filing of an invalid small operator certification does not reduce any refund liability that the operator would otherwise incur.

(3) Within 30 days of being served with a local franchising authority's notice that the local franchising authority intends to file a cable programming services tier rate complaint, an operator may certify to the local franchising authority that it meets the criteria for qualification as a small cable operator. This certification shall be filed in accordance with the cable programming services rate complaint procedure set forth in § 76.1402. Absent a cable programming services rate complaint, the operator may request a declaration of CPST rate deregulation from the Commission pursuant to § 76.7.

(c) *Transition from small cable operator status.* If a small cable operator subsequently becomes ineligible for small operator status, the operator will become subject to regulation but may maintain the rates it charged prior to losing small cable operator status if such rates (with an allowance for minor variations) were in effect for the three months preceding the loss of small cable operator status. Subsequent rate increases following the loss of small cable operator status will be subject to generally applicable regulations governing rate increases.

NOTE TO § 76.990: For rules governing small cable systems and small cable companies, see § 76.934.

[64 FR 35951, July 2, 1999]

Subpart O—Competitive Access to Cable Programming

§ 76.1000 Definitions.

As used in this subpart:

(a) *Area served by cable system.* The term "area served" by a cable system means an area actually passed by a cable system and which can be connected for a standard connection fee.

(b) *Cognizable interests.* In applying the provisions of this subpart, ownership and other interests in cable operators, satellite cable programming vendors, satellite broadcast programming vendors, or terrestrial cable programming vendors will be attributed to their holders and may subject the interest holders to the rules of this subpart. Cognizable and attributable interests shall be defined by reference to the criteria set forth in Notes 1 through 5 to § 76.501 provided, however, that:

(1) The limited partner and LLC/LLP/RLLP insulation provisions of Note 2(f) shall not apply; and

(2) The provisions of Note 2(a) regarding five (5) percent interests shall include all voting or nonvoting stock or limited partnership equity interests of five (5) percent or more.

(c) *Buying groups.* The term "buying group" or "agent," for purposes of the definition of a multichannel video programming distributor set forth in paragraph (e) of this section, means an entity representing the interests of more than one entity distributing multichannel video programming that:

(1) Agrees to be financially liable for any fees due pursuant to a satellite cable programming, satellite broadcast programming, or terrestrial cable programming contract which it signs as a contracting party as a representative of its members or whose members, as contracting parties, agree to joint and several liability; and

(2) Agrees to uniform billing and standardized contract provisions for individual members; and

(3) Agrees either collectively or individually on reasonable technical quality standards for the individual members of the group.

(d) *Competing distributors.* The term "competing," as used with respect to