

WASHINGTON -- Seeking federal help in its battle with Sinclair Broadcasting, cable operator Mediacom urged Congress to open hearings on retransmission consent and to order the station group to restore its stations on Mediacom's system.

Sinclair pulled 22 stations from Mediacom on Jan. 5 when carriage price negotiations collapsed. Mediacom appealed to the Federal Communications Commission, alleging Sinclair was negotiating in bad faith -- contrary to current retrans-consent rules. Cabler asked the FCC to order Sinclair to restore its stations while the agency considers the allegation.

Sinclair has said the dispute is simply the result of the inability of the two parties to come to mutually acceptable terms for a deal.

FCC said Friday it lacked the authority to order interim carriage. On Saturday, Mediacom CEO Rocco B. Commisso wrote to lawmakers who represent the cabler's employees in 23 states, claiming the FCC's refusal to order interim carriage constituted an agency failure to carry out its "congressionally mandated duty" to protect the public interest.

More than 2 million people in 700,000 households in "small communities across " were unfairly being denied access to Sinclair's stations, Commisso said. Mediacom would pay Sinclair for the stations' content, thus the group stood to lose nothing by allowing interim carriage, Commisso added.

Commisso argued that the FCC did have the authority to order interim carriage and also accused the agency of favoring Sinclair in the ongoing dispute. He asked

members of the House and Senate "to urge the FCC's chairman, Kevin Martin, and the other commissioners to honor the commission's mandate to protect the public interest by exercising its broad remedial authority under the Communications Act to secure, at the very least, interim carriage."

Commisso's letter also called for "congressional investigations and hearings regarding retransmission consent abuses and the FCC's handling of the Sinclair-Mediacom dispute."

In a separate but related move, four Republicans -- Reps. Nathan Deal and Charlie Norwood (Ga.), Sue Myrick (N.C.), and Lee Terry (Neb.) -- wrote the House leadership late last week asking that the Commerce Committee convene a hearing on retransmission consent.

<http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117957420.html?categoryid=14&cs=1>

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