

Senate passes anti-robocalls bill, sending it to Trump

December 19 2019, by Tali Arbel



In this May 4, 2018, file photo a man talks on the phone in a hallway adorned with the palm tree-printed wallpaper at a hotel near the Los Angeles International Airport in Los Angeles. The Senate has passed a bill that cracks down on robocalls, a persistent and costly problem for Americans. The bill has already passed the House and now goes to President Donald Trump for his signature. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

The Senate approved a bill Thursday to crack down on robocalls, sending to President Donald Trump a measure meant to combat a persistent and costly problem for Americans.

The bill, which Trump is expected to sign, would stiffen penalties and enforcement and provide consumers tools to identify and block scam calls.

It echoes and builds on preventive measures that the Federal Communications Commission and state attorneys general have pushed for. It potentially speeds up steps the telecom industry is already taking to protect Americans from the billions of scam calls made each month.

Maureen Mahoney, policy analyst for Consumer Reports, said in a statement that the measure was an important step, though "robocalls are not going to disappear overnight."

Robocalls have flooded Americans' phones because technology makes it cheap and easy to call people. Enforcement is difficult, with many scammers overseas.

The Senate passed the bill unanimously, on a voice vote, following House approval earlier this month.

The bill, called the Traced Act, requires phone companies to offer free call-blocking apps and verify that the number calling you is real. That's an issue because fraudsters fake numbers to look as though they're coming from the IRS or others to trick you.

The bill also gives the FCC more time to fine robocallers and lets the agency fine offenders without warning them first. The bill also pushes the agency to work with the Justice Department to go after criminals. Over the long term, that could act as a deterrent.

However, the final bill leaves out some protections that were in a previous version of a House bill, Mahoney notes. That version would have broadened the definition of what a robocall is and made it harder for companies like banks and cruise-ship vacation sellers to reach consumers.

The FCC has already told phone companies that they can block unwanted calls without getting customers' permission first, which could help increase the use of phone-blocking apps. That order did not require the tools be made free, while the bill does. The agency has said it expected the deployment of a new phone-number system to begin this year. Many major phone companies have begun rolling it out, but to work well all carriers must adopt it.

The phone industry trade group, USTelecom, applauded the bill's passage, saying it "will supercharge" the fight against robocallers.

But experts expect that as phone companies put more tools in place to combat robocalls, scammers will adapt and try different techniques to reach victims.

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