

Anti-robocall bill likely as House, Senate reach compromise

November 15 2019, by Tali Arbel

It's looking like an anti-robocall bill will get sent to President Donald Trump this year, helping tackle an infuriating problem in the U.S.

House and Senate leaders said Friday they've reached an agreement in principle on merging their two versions of bills against robocalls.

The House bill had gone further than the Senate one. Details about what's in the final bill are still to come, but legislators say it will require phone companies to verify that phone numbers are real, and to block calls for free. It will also give government agencies more ability to go after scammers.

It's the latest effort in a crackdown, building on steps by state attorneys general and the Federal Communications Commission as well as the phone companies.

Phone companies have been rolling out verification tools after prompting from regulators. These reassure customers that the number showing up on their phone is actually the number that called, and not a fraudster "spoofing," or faking, the number to try to get people to pick it up. Numbers can be faked to look like they're coming from the IRS, for example, or from a number with the same area code as you. But to combat this successfully, all carriers need to put the anti-spoofing system in place.

Telecom companies are also offering call-blocking apps for smartphones

and many home phones, although not always for free. The FCC in June gave them permission to turn on call-blocking by default. While tools had been available before, customers might not have known to ask about them.

Robocalls have become almost inescapable as the cost of sending them dropped and going after callers is difficult. Tech vendor YouMail said there were 5.7 billion calls from scammers, telemarketers, debt collectors and others in October. Not all those calls are unwanted, though—you might want to get the call from your pharmacy saying your prescription is ready.

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