


PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION OF OREGON
STAFF REPORT
PUBLIC MEETING DATE: May 8, 2018

REGULAR _____ CONSENT X EFFECTIVE DATE Upon Approval

DATE: April 17, 2018

TO: Public Utility Commission

FROM: Stephen Hayes 

THROUGH: Jason Eisdorfer, Bryan Conway, and Bruce Hellebuyck 

SUBJECT: CenturyTel of Oregon, CenturyTel of Eastern Oregon, Qwest Corporation and United Telephone Company of the Northwest d/b/a CenturyLink:
(Docket No. UM 1631) Petition requesting partial waiver of
OAR 860-023-0055(8)(a)(B) pursuant to the authority set forth in
OAR 860-023-000(2)

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Commission grant the petition of CenturyTel of Oregon, CenturyTel of Eastern Oregon, Qwest Corporation and United Telephone Company of the Northwest (CenturyLink or Company) for partial waiver of Oregon Administrative Rule (OAR) 860-023-0055(8)(a)(B).

DISCUSSION:

Issue

Whether the Commission should grant CenturyLink's petition to waive the first sentence of OAR 860-023-0055(8)(a)(B).

Applicable Law

Under OAR 860-023-0000(2), "Upon request or its own motion, the Commission may waive any of the Division 023 rules for good cause shown."

Pursuant to ORS 759.450(2), (3), the Commission has adopted minimum service quality standards for telecommunications utilities, such as CenturyLink, to ensure safe and

adequate service. Per ORS 759.450(3) the service quality standards must relate directly to specific customer impact indices, including carrier inquiry response times.

Consistent with ORS 759.450, the Commission requires Large Telecommunication Utility representatives in repair and business offices to respond to customer telephone calls within a specified time frame. This requirement is set forth in OAR 860-023-0055(8), the relevant part of which is set forth below:

- (8) Access to Large Telecommunications Utility Representatives. This rule sets the allowed time for large telecommunications utility business office or repair service center representatives to answer customer calls.
- (a) Measurement:
 - (A) Direct Representative Answering: A large telecommunications utility must measure the answer time from the first ring at the large telecommunications utility business office or repair service center;
 - (B) Driven, Automated, or Interactive Answering System: The option of transferring to the large telecommunications utility representative must be included in the initial local service-screening message. The large telecommunications utility must measure the answering time from the point a call is directed to its representatives; e.g., when the call leaves the Voice Response Unit;
 - (C) Each large telecommunications utility must calculate:
 - (i) The monthly percentage of the total calls placed to the business office and repair service center and the number of calls answered by representatives within 20 seconds; or
 - (ii) The average speed of answer time for the total calls received by the business office and repair service center.

Paragraph (8)(a)(C) of the rule gives a reporting utility the option of either reporting the monthly percentage of total calls placed to the business office and repair service center and the number of calls answered by representatives within 20 seconds, or a utility may calculate the average speed of answer for the total calls received by the business office and repair service center. The Company is not seeking a waiver of this portion of the rule.

CenturyLink's waiver request is limited to a portion of Section (8)(a)(B) relating to measurement of the standard that is reported. Specifically the waiver request is for relief from the requirement in the first sentence of paragraph (8)(a)(B) to provide an option in the interactive voice response system (IVR) to reach an operator in the initial local service-screening message. This is the specific portion of the Section identified in the Company's waiver petition:

The option of transferring to the large telecommunications utility representative must be included in the initial local service-screening message.

If the Commission grants this petition, the second sentence of this section will remain applicable to CenturyLink, which still requires the company to measure call response time. The second sentence of paragraph (8)(a)(B) reads as follows:

“The large telecommunications utility must measure the answering time from the point a call is directed to its representatives; e.g., when the call leaves the Voice Response Unit.”

Staff’s understanding is that CenturyLink intends to measure the answer time from the time when the Company’s IVR system directs a customer to a live representative, and that transfers to a live representative remain part of the IVR system, even though, with a waiver, the customer will not be able to bypass the IVR system with the initial message.

Analysis

Background

This service quality metric is important for two reasons. First, if telephone service providers do not provide adequate access to service representatives, this delay could affect other metrics such as trouble reports and held orders for service requests. If customers cannot reliably contact the service provider they would be prevented from making their requests that are tracked as service requests or trouble reports. Second, this metric gives an indication of the investment and consequently the commitment of a service provider to provide customer service in general.

Qwest has recently concluded a six-month program to improve service quality required by Commission Order No. 17-288, Docket UM 1836. The requested waiver will not affect the evaluation the Company’s fulfillment of its service quality performance plan requirements.

Good Cause Showing

The Company provides sufficient information to conclude there is a good cause to approve the waiver request. The primary consideration presented by the Company is that the IVR system is used by the Company in thirty-seven (37) states where it does business. CenturyLink states that an opt-out to the IVR system defeats the purpose of the standard and creates inefficiencies and may worsen customer service. One reason customer service would be worse is that the customer service records would not be available for a representative when they begin talking with the customer. Staff does not dispute the Company’s assertions regarding the difficulties and inefficiencies created by

requiring the company to provide the ability of a customer to reach a customer service representative in the beginning IVR message.

Staff finds that while carrier inquiry response times will be measured differently than as required under the rule, if a waiver is granted, response times will be measured in a way that tracks the response when a customer cannot otherwise be served and must wait to speak with a representative. Staff does not find this point of measurement inconsistent with the Commission's mandate to establish a standard for carrier response times¹.

Conclusion

The Company has provided sufficient information to support a good cause for the partial waiver request.

PROPOSED COMMISSION MOTION:

Grant the request of CenturyTel of Oregon, CenturyTel of Eastern Oregon, Qwest Corporation and United Telephone Company of the Northwest for partial waiver limited to the first sentence in OAR 860-023-0055(8)(a)(B).

UM1631.CenturyLink.OAR.860.023.0055(8)(a)(B)

¹ To the extent other service providers are similarly affected, staff may consider amendments on this measurement in any future rulemaking dockets on service quality.