

Panel Passes Big Fines For On-Air Indecency

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WASHINGTON - A House panel overwhelmingly approved legislation yesterday that would greatly increase fines against broadcasters who go beyond the bound of federal decency rules.

The bill goes to the full House for a vote.

On a 46-2 vote, the House Energy and Commerce Committee agreed to fines of as much as \$500,000 against networks and television and radio stations found by the Federal Communications Commission to violate decency standards. The current maximum fine for a violation is \$32,500.

"For those broadcasters who continue to act irresponsibly, the FCC needs adequate authority to enforce the law, and this bill would deliver that," said Rep. Fred Upton, R-Mich., the bill's chief sponsor.

Democratic Reps. Jan Schakowsky of Illinois and Henry Waxman of California opposed the measure, warning that Congress is threatening the First Amendment. "I don't like or approve of a lot of what we see on television, particularly the violence," Schakowsky said. But, "We are heading down a slippery slope when Big Brother is put in charge of what constitutes free speech and artistic expression."