

**POLLS BACK POWELL'S REG PUSH**

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WASHINGTON --- A group of Capitol Hill lawmakers has thrown its support behind FCC chairman Michael Powell, instructing the agency to wrap up its review of media ownership rules by the June deadline, despite recent calls to slow down the process.

Sen. John Breaux (D-La.) and Rep. W.J. "Billy" Tauzin (R-La.) were among those sending a letter Friday to Powell, warning the agency about the dangers of allowing the contentious issue to linger.

"Permitting this important issue to slip into summer or fall will not make the issues involved any easier to resolve," the lawmakers wrote. "It would, however, call into question the ability and willingness of the FCC to adhere to statutory deadlines clearly laid out in the Telecommunications Act of 1996."

A knowledgeable Capitol Hill aide said the letter was simply a public sign that Powell has strong allies in Congress who support what many predict will be a relaxation of the current restrictions.

Tauzin spokesman Ken Johnson said the letter also was aimed at helping to promote the broadcasting industry's transition to digital television.

Seeking clarity

"We want to bring some certainty to the marketplace," he said. "We believe that resolving the ownership rules will help us resolve many of the remaining issues holding up the transition to digital."

The move is the most recent in the political tug-of-war over the controversial changes to the rules governing media competition. Last week Powell said he wanted a vote on the proposed

reforms by June 2, amid fresh concerns that he is holding the details about what he plans to recommend close to the vest and keeping some commissioners out of the loop.

Democratic FCC commissioner Michael Copps, an outspoken critic of greater media consolidation, has griped about not receiving drafts of a proposed mathematical formula that would measure the diversity of media voices in local markets.

Democrats on Capitol Hill reacted angrily to the Tauzin-Breaux letter.

### Against relaxing rules

Rep. Jan **Schakowsky** (D-Ill.), the ranking member of the House Commerce Committee, said she was adamantly opposed to the FCC's relaxing existing rules to allow greater media concentration.

"These rules must be maintained and should be strengthened, instead of weakened," she said in a statement Tuesday. "Nothing at all should be done until the public and members of Congress have a chance to evaluate and comment on any specific proposals to change the current media ownership rules. In my view, that requires ample opportunity to consider and prepare comments, as well as a sufficient number of local hearings to allow all constituencies and all parts of the nation to voice their views."

A handful of Capitol Hill Republicans share similar concerns. Republican Sens. Olympia Snowe (Maine) and Wayne Allard (Colo.) recently called on Powell to solicit more public comment before taking action.

### Rules restrictions

Current media ownership rules prohibit a company or individual from owning TV stations and newspapers; prohibit a broadcaster from owning multiple media outlets in the same market; and restrict one broadcaster from reaching more than 35% of the national audience.

One source familiar with the internal FCC tensions over the matter predicted fellow GOP commissioner Kevin Martin eventually would side with Powell in seeking to relax the ownership rules. The source accused Copps and other Democrats of trying to drag the issue into next year's elections to use against President Bush and Republicans.

Ten lawmakers in addition to Tauzin and Breaux signed the letter, including GOP Sens. George Allen (Va.), John Ensign (Nev.), Gordon Smith (Ore.) and GOP Reps. Roy Blunt (Mo.), Mary Bono (Calif.), Vito Fosella (N.Y.), George Radanovich (Calif.), Pete Sessions (Texas), John Shimkus (Ill.) and Cliff Stearns (Fla.).