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Media giant NBCUniversal has granted an extension in its carriage talks with cable television provider Charter Communications, averting a New Year's Eve blackout of NBC-owned channels in nearly 16 million homes in the U.S. with Spectrum service.

NBCUniversal announced the extension late Saturday afternoon.

"Negotiations with Charter Spectrum for the NBCUniversal portfolio of networks have been extended," NBCUniversal said in a statement. "We will continue to negotiate in good faith so that Charter Spectrum customers can continue to receive NBCUniversal's valuable networks and we hope to be able to reach a deal."

The current pact was set to expire at midnight Eastern time. The truce suggests that the two companies are making progress in their efforts to strike a comprehensive carriage deal for more than a dozen NBC channels.

NBC declined to specify the length of the extension.

NBCUniversal declared an impasse in the contract talks Thursday, but negotiations resumed Friday and continued Saturday.

Both companies appear motivated to resolve their differences and hammer out a new deal without an outage of popular TV networks during a long holiday weekend during which millions of people are at home watching television.

Such a blackout would have affected more than 1.6 million homes with Spectrum service in the Los Angeles region. Those customers would have lost coverage of KNBC-TV Channel 4, which is scheduled to televise Sunday's high-profile NFL match-up between the Green Bay Packers and the Detroit Lions on "Sunday Night Football."

In addition to KNBC, NBCUniversal owns the Spanish-language Telemundo network and cable channels USA, Syfy, Bravo, E!, NBC Sports, Golf Channel, MSNBC and CNBC.

Connecticut-based Charter, which declined to comment, acquired Time Warner Cable in May, and rebranded its cable TV, phone and broadband Internet service as Spectrum.

Contentious carriage contract negotiations have become more common in the media industry. Pay-TV operators face an increasingly fraught environment as more consumers cut the cable cord in favor of lower-cost alternatives, such as SlingTV, Netflix and Hulu. Distributors do not want to risk alienating more customers by continuously raising their rates.

At the same time, media companies such as NBCUniversal have been shelling out more money for programming, particularly for sports. NBC, for example, pays the NFL more than \$1 billion annually for rights to televise "Sunday Night Football" and a handful of Thursday night games.

Media companies have demanded higher fees from distributors to help pay for the programming – prompting a more tenacious tug of war between the two sides.

NBC executives also have been laboring for years to raise their programming fees, which are below industry averages. When the previous round of deals was struck about six years ago, NBC was owned by General Electric Co. The NBC broadcast network was in the ratings cellar – in fourth place among the big broadcast networks. NBC had less bargaining power than rivals such as Walt Disney Co., which owns ABC, ESPN and the Disney Channel.

Philadelphia cable giant Comcast Corp. bought NBCUniversal in 2011. NBC now is a top network and has more leverage in negotiations with pay-TV companies, such as Charter. – ***Los Angeles Times***



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