The Federal Communications Commission ordered the nation's cable operators last Thursday to roll back their rates, a move expected to save America's 57 million cable households $1 billion a year.

Most consumers should begin seeing the rate reductions on their monthly cable bill by August, FCC officials said. Further price scrutiny by the FCC and new restrictions that the agency has imposed on cable operators could delay the normal rate cuts later on.

The FCC move to clamp a lid on soaring cable rates marks a return to regulation for an industry that enjoys a monopoly in local markets but was deregulated in 1986. "There were no perfect answers to this complex issue," interim FCC Chairman James H. Quello said before voting to approve the new rate restrictions.

Overriding a veto by then-President Bush, Congress last October ordered the FCC to lower cable rates, a move that continued to run its course since then. The FCC action Thurs-day will roll back rates to their 1982, 30 level, a reduction on average of 3 percent to 5 percent, agency officials said.

The cable industry attacked Thursday's ruling, warning that big rate reductions could hamper competition, reduce the service's quality, force banks to invest in programming and offer limited choices for consumers such as interactive cable systems that boast 500 channels or more.

Lawmakers and consumer groups, meanwhile, complained that the FCC didn't go far enough.

"It's a step in the right direction, but we are disappointed that the rate reductions were not larger; we think rate reductions of 30 percent were justified," said Ginnie Kimmelstein, legislative director of the Consumer Federation of America, a Washington coalition of 240 consumer groups.

Rep. Edward J. Markey, D-Mass., who chairs the powerful House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Finance, said he also would "like to have seen the FCC's rate rollbacks go even further."

Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, D-Conn., called the FCC's action "a good first step" but added that "it cannot be the last step. The FCC's own data shows that mosapoly (cable) systems, charged on average, 17 percent more than systems with head-to-head competition."

The move sets up several legal challenges, including a lawsuit that will affect only "basic" cable service, such as retransmissions of local broadcast stations and public access. It will not apply to pay-per-view services such as video on demand, local boxing and other special events, nor to premium channels such as Home Box Office and Showtime.

That provision could allow cable companies to profitably unbundle the basic services they offer now, which often include Cable News Network and Music Television, or MTV, and other popular add-ons. By offering those separately, cable operators could pose an economic threat to a basic service of a bar ofter service.

Prices for the unbundled add-ons could then rise free of regulation, said Doug Webbink, the FCC chief of policy and rules in the agency's Mass Media Bureau.

The move by the defense lawyers who tormented the prosecution with an endless parade of witnesses took surprise and forced the judge to dismiss the four officers. The defense lawyers said they had no indication, based on the evidence in the agency's intelligence division, that the cult had a detailed plan to move back to the area once the raid "is going to be taken apart down to the last nut and bolt" during a forthcoming Treasury Department investigation and possible congressional hearings. 

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