

Knesset bans placing cellular antennas on residential buildings

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Cellular antennas will no longer be placed in living quarters, including balconies, the Knesset Internal Affairs and Environment Committee approved Wednesday, as part of a unanimous endorsement of the non-ionizing radiation regulations.

The Non-Ionizing Radiation Law was introduced in 2005, and came into effect in January 2007, but the attached regulations were yet to be set.

The cellular companies claim the ban was an opportunistic move, but the Forum for Sane Cellular Consumption stresses that it was included in the Environment Ministry's first draft on the issue. Committee chairman MK Ophir Pines-Paz (Labor) categorically told the panel that unless the regulations ban the placing of antennas on balconies, he will not allow the vote. The regulations stipulate that in specific cases the environment minister can sanction the placing of antennas on rooftop balconies.

The regulations may bear severe ramifications for the cellular companies, since antenna operation permits must be renewed every five years. Therefore, antennas which are currently placed on balconies would have to be relocated when their permits expire.

The Cellular Companies Forum issued an enraged comment: "This is the end of the cellular companies' ability to establish a cellular infrastructure in Israel. The new regulations pose enormous obstacles for Israel's cellular network. The result would be fewer antennas: radiation levels would rise and reception and other services would be severely affected. We are preparing for an all-out war against these regulations."

The regulations also stipulate that the radiation level standard will remain unchanged for now, and a mechanism to review radiation level standards periodically will be employed. In addition, the environment minister will be required to hold public hearings regarding cellular radiation issues. Finally, the regulations stipulate that a company that carries out radiation surveys and more than 20 percent of its income emanate from a cellular company would have to announce it publicly to boost transparency.

Four municipalities ban small size antennas

Four big cities - Jerusalem, Raanana, Herzliya and Ashdod - have recently decided to ban further erection of small size antennas in their jurisdiction. The ban goes in line with the law that prohibits the construction of wireless stations that are bigger than 30X50X80cm without building permits.

It is expected that other cities will join the fight against the present process of setting up small cellular antennas.

According to law, cellular firms can set up a small antenna, known as a "Wireless access facility," (*ndlr Hot Spots*) without informing the public and without receiving a building permit.

The cities are now demanding companies apply for building permits for these antennas too. The use of such antennas has grown enormously, since permits for large antennas can be difficult to receive, and can take a long time.

While there are no comprehensive figures on the number of such small antennas, estimates suggest 800 antennas are in use, making up about 10 percent of all antennas in the country.

The Ministry for Environmental Protection has decided to fall in line with the cities' decisions. But the companies intend to fight, and are considering legal action, claiming that the installation of such antennas is legal, and cannot be prevented.