

Jurors find for DirecTV

3 men face fines in groundbreaking civil court verdict

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In the first verdict of its kind in the nation, three South Carolina men face hefty fines after a federal jury in Charleston ruled that they used illegal devices to steal DirecTV's satellite signal. The jury decided Thursday in civil court that Lewis P. Freye of Barnwell and Joseph C. Brunson Jr. of Walterboro had twice violated federal laws prohibiting the illegal interception of satellite signals or the assistance of others in intercepting the signals. They face penalties of up to \$10,000 apiece for each violation plus punitive damages, said their attorney, Christopher Murphy.

A third defendant, Eddie D. Dixon of Ridgeville, was found liable for the same federal violation.

The jury also decided that Dixon distributed the illegal devices, a violation that carries a maximum fine of \$100,000 plus damages, Murphy said.

U.S. District Judge David Norton plans to hold a hearing in the next few weeks before announcing the penalties.

The jury's verdict was hailed by DirecTV's lead lawyer in the case, who said it should send a stern message to anyone thinking of stealing satellite signals.

"I think the word will get out," said Andrew Metalka of Galveston, Texas. "If you pirate our TV signals, you could be held liable for it. And the same word also will go out to the pirate community." DirecTV has been busy the past two years with lawsuits against firms that manufacture and sell devices that let owners use DirecTV's signals without paying for them. Trials this week in Charleston and California were the first in the nation in which a jury was asked whether anyone who buys the devices or gives them to someone else had broken federal laws.

The trial began Tuesday and involved civil action only. None of the defendants faced criminal charges.

Earlier Thursday, Norton dismissed similar suits against Leroy Cromedy of Huger and Brandon Moore of Greenwood. He said the evidence against the two men wasn't strong enough.

No one testified that they saw anyone steal the signals, and all three men who face penalties said they purchased the devices for someone else. Four devices were displayed in court, including one known as a "smart card" because it unscrambles the DirecTV signal when it's inserted into a receiver that's hooked to a television set.

Metalka argued that possession of the items was enough to infer guilt "because there's no other use for the devices. They cost hundreds of dollars."

Murphy, though, insisted that "this is all about money. There's no evidence of theft. There's no evidence that they stole the signals."

The jury deliberated less than two hours. After the trial, juror David Churchill of Summerville said he thought "the defense did a good job but didn't have much to work with. This was a jury made up of people of modest means. They weren't swayed by the fact that a corporation was involved." Murphy said he and other lawyers will examine these cases as they face another trial next month. Roughly 300 people in South Carolina have been accused of similar violations, and 12 of them are coming to trial Feb. 9, he said.