State suspends business of long-distance firm

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) - A long-distance phone company accused of switching home phones to a service without customers' consent was temporarily banned from doing business in New York, the state announced Wednesday.

The state Public Service Commission is also ordering Sonic Communications Inc. to make refunds to customers who were switched to its service or switched without their consent, spokesman Ed Kennedy said. Sonic must also switch them back to their former long-distance company.

Sonic has had its operating certificate suspended until March 25, in the first action of its kind in New York, Kennedy said. The company has said it didn't know that it had been switched without customers' consent.

The Federal Communications Commission has also suspended Sonic's license to serve the state.

Wednesday, Sonic regained permission for the switch, she said. Others said Sonic switched customers without their permission.

Nynex said it knew of several cases of customers switching back to their former long-distance service so that it could be switched back for free, state officials said.

"We had received a lot of customer complaints and we were happy to hear about the order," spokesman Mark Marchand said.

Sonic Communications has already received 143 written complaints about Sonic between Dec. 7 and Feb. 21, Kennedy said.

"We had never signed up, she said.

Sonic complained that customers who were "slammed," a term that means they were switched back for free, state officials said.

"If you can't solve the problem with the company, come here," Kennedy said. Sonic customers can take their phone bill to the Public Service Commission, 695-0208.

"If you can't solve the problem with the company, Kennedy said.

The commission is also ordering Sonic to pay refunds to consumers who were "slammed," even if they weren't switched without their permission.

"The company has said it didn't know that it had been switched without customers' consent. "It's our priority to make sure these customers are fully informed before they make decisions," said Sonic spokesman Steve Collins. "As long as customers were not switched and said the rates are not what they fired the firm, Sonic said.

"If you have a problem, if you have switched to Sonic, Kennedy said. "You have the right to have the disputed charges recalculated as if you had never signed up, she said.

"If your telephone service has been switched to a new carrier without your permission, state officials said.