Microsoft to sell Windows Minus Browser in Europe

By Jessica Mintz, AP Technology Writer
SEATTLE (AP) -- Microsoft Corp. said last week that it will make a separate version of the Windows 7 computer operating software for Europe that does not include its Internet Explorer Web browser, as it tries to head off another antitrust scuffle with regulators there.

At the same time, Microsoft has left open the possibility that this measure will not satisfy the European Union, which said in January that the software maker's practice of selling Internet Explorer as a part of Windows violates its antitrust rules.

The EU ordered Microsoft to separate the Web surfing software from its PC operating system. The preliminary decision came after a yearlong investigation into complaints from a rival browser maker, Norway's Opera Software ASA, which said Microsoft's practices amounted to an unfair distribution advantage. Since then, Mozilla Corp., which makes the Firefox browser, and Google Inc. have signed on as third parties against Microsoft in the case.

Microsoft's browser is the most widely used worldwide, but Firefox is gaining in popularity and Google, the top Web search provider, has released its own Web browser, Chrome.

Microsoft is hoping to land on regulators' good side this time, after racking up $2.63 billion in fines from a previous antitrust case. The European Commission found the company had violated competition rules by bundling its media player software with Windows and by making it difficult for rivals' programs to communicate with Microsoft's.

The company had already built into Windows 7 a way to disable Internet Explorer, a change that seemed designed to satisfy regulators' concerns. The software maker would not say whether the EU has acknowledged the change.

"We're committed to making Windows 7 available in Europe at the same time it launches in the rest of the world, but we also must comply with European competition law as we launch Windows 7," said Kevin Kutz, a public affairs director for the company, in an e-mailed statement.

Windows 7 is due out on Oct. 22. The Europe-only versions were described earlier by CBS Corp.'s CNET News.

Kutz said Microsoft will give computer makers the option to install IE on Windows 7 computers headed for Europe. It will also give PC users who want the browser a way

to obtain it.

In a blog post, Dave Heiner, a deputy general counsel for Microsoft, wrote that the company's decision to split IE and Windows 7 doesn't "preclude the possibility of alternative approaches emerging through commission processes." He said alternative remedies have been proposed, including pre-installing other browsers in Windows 7, or a screen that would prompt people to choose their browsers from a list of options.

The EU has not yet issued its final decision. Microsoft requested a hearing to respond to the preliminary findings, but the parties could not agree on a date. Shares of Microsoft added 28 cents to close at $22.83.

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