INTERNET and telco companies have accepted a promise from the Howard Government to protect them from an avalanche of copyright law suits after the free trade agreement with the US comes into force on January 1. Following a last-minute lobbying effort on Monday involving industry bodies, Telstra and Optus, the Government yesterday wrote a letter to the Opposition defending the proposed law.

But after the lobbying, Trade Minister Mark Vaile said some details - such as when internet providers were required to block websites which allegedly breached another person's copyright - could be clarified by a special regulation.

The promise was enough to secure Labor's support for the final bills that implement the landmark trade deal. Earlier in the day some Opposition MPs had argued they should block it, rather than let the copyright changes stand.

Telstra and Optus, together with the Internet Industry Association, had been concerned about two items in the legislation under which they would be required to remove disputed copyright material, leaving the internet company exposed to potential litigation.

"These concerns could be resolved through the regulations that will flesh out the legislative safe harbour provisions," Mr Vaile said in his letter to counterpart Simon Crean.

"We will continue to consult with stakeholders on these issues in the preparation of the regulations."

Though Labor had not considered blocking the FTA legislation, Mr Crean acknowledged there were genuine concerns in the internet service provider industry and that he would table Mr Vaile's letter in the Lower House.

"I've not wanted this to hold up the FTA, given that our amendments were not at issue," Mr Crean said.

"The issue was the Government's failure to implement what they had promised with regard to copyright.

"What I am prepared to do under these circumstances is to accept the fact that they will pick up these issues under regulation.

"The Government (through Mr Vaile's letter) will keep the implementation of the scheme under close review, and will consult with the stakeholders on any issues that may arise, including appropriate responses," Mr Crean said.

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