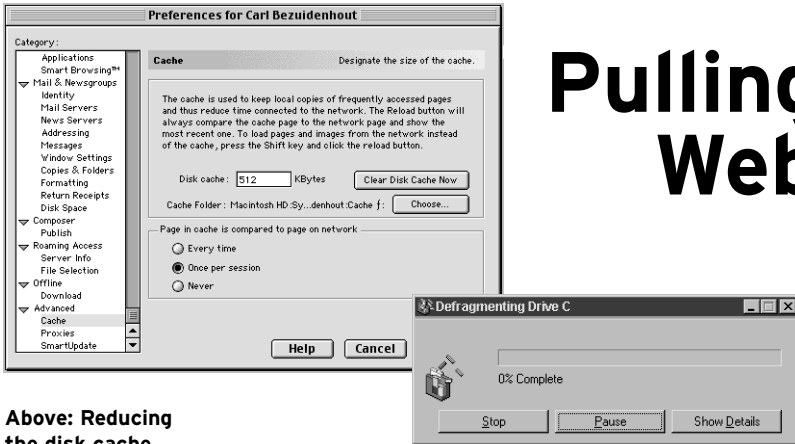BY HON. JEFFERSON LANKFORD

Pulling Into the Web's Fast Lane

Above: Reducing the disk cache size in Netscape Navigator.
Right: Defragmenting files on your PC hard drive can make it more efficient.

Above: Clearing temporary Internet files in Internet Explorer 5.0 helps speed up your browser.

YOU START THE computer and try to connect to the Internet. Everything is in slow motion: starting the computer, opening your browser, connecting to Web sites, downloading images and files. What's wrong? Can anything be done?

Although many things contribute to slowing, start by looking at your own computer. As you add programs and files, the computer gets slower because programs you add to a Windows operating system add to and change the system "registry." Every bit of the registry is examined every time you start the computer. That's why booting up takes longer now than when you first bought the computer. Even if you delete or uninstall a program, the registry likely keeps the changes made by that program.

What can you do? Be conservative in adding software. Add only what you need. Don't add programs just to try them out. And never try to delete the superfluous software that comes "bundled" with the computer. That may delete part of the registry that is shared with and needed by another program. If it does, you have a serious problem that may be repaired only by reinstalling Windows.

Another remedy is to use the disk defragmenter periodically. This is found in Windows (click Programs, Accessories, System Tools). The defragmenter reorganizes files on the hard drive and makes it more efficient. When you open the defragmenter, ignore the message that says the system does not need defragmentation. It helps to defrag even when that message is displayed. Warning: It takes a long time to defrag a large hard drive.

The next suspect in slowing is your Web browser. Your browser stores Web pages and images from past visits in cache files. The idea is that downloading is faster from a cache file on your computer than remotely from a Web site. But you can accumulate thousands of these files, and that bogs down your browser. To reduce this problem, periodically clear your cache.

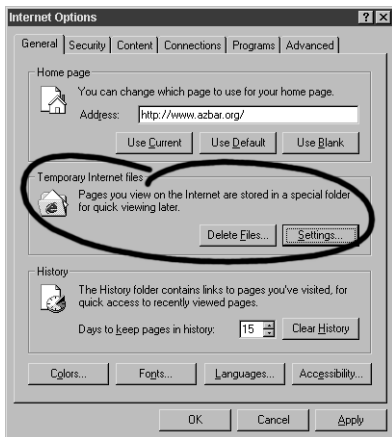In Internet Explorer 4.0, use the Edit menu; in 5.0, use Tools. Click on Internet Options, then General and Delete Files. While you are there, you can click on Settings and limit the number of files in the cache. In Netscape Navigator, clear the cache by selecting Edit, then Preferences, Advanced, Cache and Clear Disk Cache. To limit cache size, enter a lower number in the box for "Disk Cache"—try 512.

Another culprit in slowing is the speed of your connection. Even if you have the latest telephone modem, the speed of data transmission over phone lines is limited by federal regulation to a rate below the theoretical fastest speed of the modem. Telephone modems are vastly inferior in speed to a variety of high-speed connections offered by the phone company, cable companies and satellite providers. The cost of these services may be twice or more what you pay for a phone dial-up connection, but the download speeds are up to 50 times faster, which virtually eliminates the frustrating time waiting for a Web page to download.

One factor in slowing that you can't do much about is a problem with the Web host's server. If the server has technical problems or is simply being overloaded with "hits," connecting may be time-consuming or even impossible. Avoid visiting a hot new Web site on its first few days. If a connection seems slow, try again later—another day and a different time of day if possible.

Connection problems can be greatest after work hours, as users go online at home. The problem is worst in the West because the rest of the country is already online when we get there. Try connecting later in the evening as the East Coast goes to bed. ◬

Questions about the Internet? Contact the Internet Browser by e-mail at sidebar@home.com.