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ACMA takes key role at milestone spectrum summit, C-band issue escalates

The Australian Communications and Media Authority is set to take a key role at a Queensland event next week that will shape the entire Asia-Pacific position for key global spectrum decisions in 2015. ACMA, along with the Department of Communications, will host the third Asia-Pacific Telecommunity Preparatory Group Summit, in Brisbane; ACMA chair Chris Chapman will deliver the inaugural address; and, for the first time, the Authority will run a training workshop just before the event for new participants from across the region.

But meanwhile, one of the hottest issues looming for the event – the resurgent clash over C-band spectrum, and whether it should be kept for its traditional satellite occupants or partly re-assigned to mobile operators – continues to gain momentum. A document lodged in the run-up to the Brisbane summit by Pacific Island nations, seen by CommsDay, makes an impassioned appeal for developed nations not to “sacrifice” the C-band to international mobile telecommunications, arguing that this would ultimately kill satellite services in the band completely and strand Pacific Island countries reliant on C-band satellite.

The APG Summit is a key milestone in the lead-in to next year’s International Telecommunications Union World Radio Communication Conference in Geneva, a forum for many key debates over spectrum assignment and other critical international radio communications issues. With over 350 radcomms leaders from 32 Asia-Pacific countries expected to attend, and representatives from the ITU, the European Conference of Postal and Telecommunications Administrations and the Inter-American Telecommunication Commission to join as observers, the five-day Brisbane conference is intended to develop common proposals and views for the entire APAC region to take to WRC-15.

According to the Asia-Pacific Telecommunity, the APG event has become one of the body’s most important activities, and “has met exemplary success in presenting the views of the region at WRCs.” Because regional proposals carry much more influence than individual country proposals at the global WRC events, the APG summit is also important in ensuring that Australia’s own position on the various WRC issues is supported.

“Australia is delighted to host this important meeting, which represents a key milestone in the lead-up to WRC-15,” said Chapman. “We anticipate five days of intensive dialogue and negotiations to develop Asia-Pacific technical positions that will be used at WRC-15 to identify new global spectrum opportunities.”

Agenda items for WRC-15 include wireless aviation electronics, weather and climate monitoring, international satellite coordination and new spectrum for mobile communications.

C-BAND BATTLE HEATS UP: One issue that’s already exploded into heated debate ahead of the Brisbane forum, and looks set to be a major focal point at the event, is the C-band clash – falling under agenda item 1.1 for WRC-15, which looks at additional frequency bands for IMT use.

Mobile players have revived their bid to grab a chunk of the band, arguing that it will be necessary to help sate growing mobile broadband demands. Satellite operators already using the band, though, say their mobile opponents are inflating demand forecasts; moreover, they’ve argued that if terrestrial mobile players start using the band in some countries, the resulting interference will essentially ren-

der the band unusable for satellite services.

And they contend that, as that begins to happen in some countries, economies of scale will drop away for C-band equipment manufacturers, eventually either killing C-band satellite completely or pushing prices through the roof for those countries which rely on it.

That debate, and a secondary argument around the ACMA's own preliminary position on it, has been escalating in the pages of CommsDay across recent weeks.

Dr Bob Horton, an ex-Australian Communications Authority head and now a satellite industry lobbyist, has criticised the ACMA – which has actually taken the preliminary position that it will not seek IMT identification in 3.7-4.2GHz C-band spectrum – for being too passive in not actively opposing other countries' efforts to carve out chunks of C-band.

Ex-ACMA board member Reg Coutts has argued that Australia's WRC position must also take into account the needs of its regional neighbours.

However, Dr Andrew Kerans, until recently the ACMA's executive manager for spectrum policy and regulation, has said that C-band should be preserved only in jurisdictions where the reliance on satellites for interconnectivity is high – and even that the ACMA should support a co-primary IMT allocation in the band for Australia, to give it the flexibility to reassign the band at a later date without being locked into the three- or four-year WRC cycle.

And in the other camp Brian Louey-Gung, of the Pacific ICT Regulatory Resource Sector, has voiced the personal opinion that “authorising IMT to access C-band spectrum on a country-by-country basis will be the start of a slow but inevitable for C-band satellite services,” ultimately stranding a number of Pacific Island countries totally dependent on the band, and urged a broader international consideration emphasising Australia's interest in the Pacific.

Now, CommsDay has sighted an appeal to the APT ahead of the APG summit in Brisbane from representatives of Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Nauru, the Solomon Islands and Tuvalu, recommending a 'No Change' position on the C-band downlink. They argue that “If C-band satellite is sacrificed to IMT by developed countries, then in the medium to long term, satellite C-band services would cease, and the Pacific Island countries which are heavily reliant on C-band FSS would lose their services completely.”

“Satellite-based services using C-band frequencies in the Pacific Islands are often regarded as “lifeline” services as they may be the only service available in a remote island environment,” adds the Pacific Islands submission. “Disruption of these services would kill the Pacific Islands' only form of critical communications, as C-band satellite beams cannot be satisfactorily replaced by Ku-band or Ka-band for cost, technical and logistic reasons. Moreover, economic development in the Pacific Islands would be seriously harmed without access to satellite-based C-band services.”

Regionally, it's been suggested that at this stage, China and Iran may be prepared to help defend use of the C-band for satellite.

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ACCC broadband monitoring scheme in limbo

A controversial broadband monitoring program proposed by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission looks to be in limbo, despite the regulator having detailed the technical and operational requirements needed for the scheme.

According to a position paper released by the ACCC, no decision has been made to proceed with the monitoring and any plan would still be subject to funding. Under the current government focus of reducing regulatory overheads, that would seem unlikely.

The ACCC also noted that should the scheme get approved, implementation would not happen before 2015. When it was first proposed in August last year, industry body Communications Alliance voiced its objection to the scheme, arguing that there was no market failure that warranted ACCC intervention.

“Typically, the decision to pursue regulatory intervention is subsequent to the identification of a market failure and the quantification of consumer detriment,” Comms Alliance wrote in a submission to the ACCC. “At this point, best practice regulation would dictate that a number of options to address the issue should be considered.”

Since its consultation paper last year, the ACCC has conducted a closed consultation process from December 2013 through March 2014. It was intended to give key industry stakeholders the chance to discuss their views with the ACCC in more detail and to provide further input on specific issues associated with the design and implementation of the proposed program.

According to the ACCC's position paper released this week, the rollout of the NBN is a key driver for the ACCC's consideration of a monitoring and reporting program.

“With higher potential service performance comes a greater risk of consumer detriment if expectations are created and not met,” it said. “RSPs have an important role to play both in terms of how they construct and market specific offerings to consumers and in terms of their wholesale capacity provisioning decisions.”

The regulator claimed that data produced by the proposed program would enable specific conclusions to be drawn about the performance of individual RSPs.

“A decision by an RSP to either provision sufficient network capacity to meet end-user demand, or provision more limited capacity to reduce costs, would be clearly reflected in test results, particularly through peak-time metrics,” it stated.

The ACCC also noted that detailed specifications outlined in the position paper would still be subject to change and would need to be addressed if it were to proceed to tender.

Geoff Long

CROSSTALK PODCAST: THE PROS AND CONS OF THE NET PROMOTER SCORE

The telco world has embraced the idea of the Net Promoter Score. Why? Because its simple. Ask customers how likely they are to recommend you to a friend and you get the net score of your promoters versus detractors. It's used to incentivise staff in many telcos around the world and is a key measure in the turnaround happening at Telstra. But does it disguise the need for a quantum shift in customer improvements?

Martha Brooke the founder and program director of Interaction Metrics in Portland, Oregon says it has to be treated with caution, though. For a start it's easy to cheat the system. Whenever a measure influences peoples' pay they will always find a way to fudge it.

Even if the NPS is seen as an effective measure of customer satisfaction it doesn't tell you how to fix issues. But there are tools for that. David Stevenson, General Manager for Motive Customer Experience Solutions at Alcatel Lucent, says many problems now relate to devices – tracking events at the network level can help identify issues and can be added to a knowledge base of worldwide symptoms that might be caused by a particular app on a particular device, for example.

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