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Telcos eye way to bring fast broadband to mobile phones

4:00AM Tuesday May 19, 2009
By John Drinnan

Vodafone and Telecom are pressing for the Government to set aside analogue radio frequencies used by television channels to allow ultra-fast broadband for mobile phones.

The Ministry of Economic Development has unveiled a scoping plan for its review of the broadcasting frequencies before it considers advice to the Government at the end of this year on life after analogue TV.

With up to 56 per cent of New Zealanders watching television through digital signals – on Sky TV or Freeview – the Government is hastening the analogue switch-off planned for between 2012 and 2015.

Once broadcasters have vacated the bulk of the analogue Ultra High Frequency (UHF) and Very High Frequency (VHF) bands, they can be auctioned.

Some frequencies will be retained for the shift to digital and they do have other uses but with well-resourced companies such as Telecom and Vodafone ready to compete for frequencies, the Government review will focus on mobile communications.

The frequencies would allow telcos to provide an improved internet service to mobile phone users.

Many believe that a 2012 switchover is not viable but Telecom and Vodafone are pushing for that date. Telecom spokesman Mark Watts said: "Any delay in allocating the spectrum may have a material cost to consumers."



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Vodafone spokesman Paul Brislen said that by 2012 it was hoped most New Zealanders would have made the shift to digital television.

Communications Minister Steven Joyce said allocating the frequencies for mobile phones was not a fait accompli.

There were issues such as international standards to be considered, and there were no expectations to specify a more defined analogue switch-off date after the review, he said.

The money raised from the auction of analogue frequencies – the so-called "digital dividend" – is estimated by one telecommunications analyst to be worth \$100 million to the Crown, and \$230 million to the New Zealand economy.

In practice, with broadband services being the focus of a major infrastructural development, nobody knows how much will be raised at auction although telcos have the financial muscle to provide a big payoff for the sale of UHF signals.

These are presently used by Sky TV for its four analogue channels, for Prime TV and as back up for the other free-to-air channels to reach difficult terrain.

Some UHF frequencies will be suited for mobile broadband.

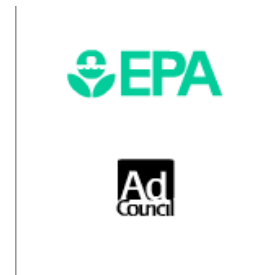
What is not so clear is what the future demand for VHF – frequencies used by TV One, TV2, and TV3 – will be.

While there are some prospects that VHF could be used for the development of digital radio, the Ministry of Economic Development says VHF signals are not suitable for mobile phones.

The ministry's radio frequency service senior policy adviser, Ian Hutchings, said one option was to delay the VHF auction.

But Watts insisted there was a clear path for mobile operators to use the spectrum in the 698–806 MHz spectrum range (often described as the 700 MHz band).

"Telecom ... considers that high-speed mobile broadband will offer significant benefit to consumers and the economy," he said.



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