

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

3 NBTC commissioners oppose payment to MCOT

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One-third of the nine commissioners of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) strongly oppose the plan to compensate MCOT Plc for returning its unused 2600-megahertz spectrum to the regulator for auctions.

The three commissioners said the state-owned broadcaster has never used the 190MHz of bandwidth on the 2600MHz spectrum that it owned for a decade, so MCOT must return the unused spectrum to the regulator without any conditions or compensation.

More importantly, the commissioners pointed out the NBTC's broadcasting committee came up with a resolution in September 2016 concluding MCOT no longer has the right to hold or use the spectrum range to provide any services.

The three commissioners are Col Natee Sukolrat, Supinya Klangnaron, and Prawit Leesathapornwongsa, said an NBTC source who asked not to be named. Col Natee is also chairman of the NBTC's broadcasting committee.

The commissioners' opposition adds tumult to the timeline of the plan set by the NBTC to auction 80MHz of bandwidth on the 2600MHz band by this year-end in preparation for the fifth generation (5G) of mobile broadband technology.

The NBTC is on the verge of negotiating a compensation framework with MCOT. Although the NBTC is not authorised to pay compensation to state agencies in return for frequencies, the regulator hopes the draft NBTC bill will allow it to do just that.

The bill is expected to come into effect by

June this year. The bill suggests the regulator could compensate state agencies that return spectrum, leading to better arrangement of spectrum slots.

Col Natee confirmed he does not agree with the compensation plan as MCOT has never used the spectrum and compensation contradicts the principle of using national resources for optimum benefit.

In addition, MCOT is now a listed company, not a purely state-owned enterprise. "Paying compensation to MCOT means paying money to private investors," he said.

"No matter how you slice it, MCOT no longer has the right to negotiate with NBTC as it has no authority to hold or use the spectrum. It must return it for reallocation for auctions."

Last month the broadcasting committee's resolution was raised as an agenda item at an NBTC board meeting for endorsement. But the resolution was removed from the agenda by NBTC secretary-general Takorn Tantasith.

Mr Prawit said he agreed with Col Natee as he finds it hard to explain to the public why the NBTC has to compensate MCOT for spectrum it never used.

Even though the NBTC board has not endorsed the committee's resolution, it is sufficient to force MCOT to return the spectrum unconditionally because the broadcasting committee governs MCOT directly, said Mr Prawit.

MCOT told the NBTC last year it wanted to return 80MHz of bandwidth of the total 190MHz to the NBTC for its auction. MCOT said it expects compensation in line with the new NBTC draft bill.

Some analysts have speculated

compensation might be provided after the licensing auction.

Mr Takorn said earlier that after the draft bill takes effect, the NBTC office would set up a working committee to determine compensation for spectrum returns.

The working committee would comprise representatives from state agencies such as the Finance Ministry, the Budget Bureau, the National Economic and Social Development Board and the Digital Economy and Society Ministry.

The NBTC office expects to grant at least three licences during the 2600MHz band auctions, with two licences of 25MHz each and another of 30MHz.

Mobile operators have asked the regulator to set a clear spectrum auction road map, especially for 2600MHz, the most compatible band for 5G technology.