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ComReg publishes latest proposals on future use of 900 MHz mobile radio spectrum

The Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) has today published a further response to its ongoing public consultation on the future use of the GSM mobile phone frequency bands.

In this consultation ComReg sets out its proposals to licensing the 900 MHz band for next generation wireless services.

Prior to the expiry of Vodafone's and Telefónica O2's respective GSM 900 MHz licences in 2011, and Meteor's in 2015, ComReg is proposing a combinatorial two-stage auction of rights of use in the 900 MHz band. Under this proposal, spectrum-usage rights would be auctioned in blocks of 2 x 5 MHz with applicants able to compete for 900 MHz spectrum up to a cap of 2 x 10 MHz.

In accordance with European legislation requiring implementation in 2010 regarding the use of the 900 MHz band, spectrum would be made available on a "liberalised" basis, rather than the GSM-only basis. In other words, in future it will be possible to use such spectrum for GSM and/or 3G (UMTS) and potentially other technologies, subject to certain conditions. The auction design proposed in ComReg's consultation response would also provide Meteor with an opportunity to compete for liberalised spectrum in advance of 2015 when its current GSM licence expires.

ComReg is seeking the views of interested parties on a range of matters, including its proposed approach to the licensing in the 900 MHz band, proposed auction design, and potential licence conditions (such as ones relating to coverage and quality of service, for example).

This is ComReg's third consultation paper on the liberalisation of the GSM bands. Responses to the preceding consultations demonstrated keen interest among operators seeking future access to liberalised spectrum.

This consultation addresses matters of considerable importance to the electronic communications sector, and ComReg therefore encourages all interested parties to respond to this consultation which will close at 5pm (local time) on Friday 12 February 2010.

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Notes for Editors

The background to this consultation is that, in the 900 MHz band, two mobile network operators' GSM licences expire in 2011, whilst the third will expire in 2015. ComReg wishes to provide all stakeholders with some visibility of the market beyond the expiration of current licences, as well as consulting with them in relation to, and reviewing, the most effective and efficient way to manage and use this scarce and in-demand spectrum, and in relation to the potential methods for allocation of rights of use regarding that spectrum.

The main focus of this consultation document relates to the future use of the 900 MHz band. However, it also addresses future use of the 1800 MHz band – also currently used for GSM-based services and where existing licences are due to expire in 2015.

The recent amendment of a European Directive, which previously restricted the use of this spectrum to GSM only, will permit future licensees to use spectrum in these bands to offer advanced 3G mobile services to consumers. The 900 MHz band, in particular, has advantageous propagation characteristics which will enable mobile operators to offer consumers access to high speed mobile services with nationwide, indoor coverage.

ComReg, as the National Regulatory Authority with responsibility for electronic communications regulation and spectrum-management, must ensure that radio spectrum, as a finite and valuable natural resource, is managed and used efficiently and effectively and in the best interests of all users.