New permit regime for submarine telecommunications cables

ACMA now has new procedures in place for carriers intending to install submarine cables in Australian waters.

Submarine cables are the underwater connections which carry about 99 per cent of Australia's international voice and data traffic. Under legislation introduced last year, carriers must obtain a permit from ACMA before installing a new submarine cable.

ACMA has released a guide and application form to assist telecommunications carriers applying for a permit to install a submarine cable in Australian waters, other than in a protection zone or coastal waters. These are called non-protection zone installation permits.

The guide outlines the legislative requirements governing the process of applying for permits, including fees payable, and ACMA's policies and procedures for administering this process. It also provides general information about the criteria ACMA must consider before granting a permit to install a submarine cable.

Before granting a non-protection zone installation permit, ACMA must have regard to:

- the objective of facilitating supply of efficient, modern and cost-effective carriage services to the public; and
- the impact of the installation on the environment; and
- any relevant technical and economic aspects of the installation; and
- whether the installation involves co-location of the submarine cable or cables to which the application relates with one or more other submarine cables; and
- any other matters ACMA considers relevant.

If an application is granted, ACMA may make the permit subject to specified conditions that relate to the installation of the cable or cables. It is an offence to install a submarine cable without a permit or to breach the conditions of a permit.

A non-protection zone installation permit will remain in force for 18 months from the day it is granted. Carriers may seek an extension of a permit for an additional 180 days (before the permit expires) by providing ACMA with reasons in writing for seeking the extension. There is no limit to the number of extensions that may be granted, but a fee will be payable in each case.

ACMA may also issue permits for cables to be installed in specially declared protection zones. Protection zones have not yet been declared by ACMA and applications for permits to install submarine cables in areas declared as protection zones will be subject to different legislative requirements.

Application forms for non-protection zone installation permits and the *Guide to Applying for a Permit to Install a Submarine Cable in Australian Waters (other than in a protection zone or coastal waters)* are on the ACMA website, where you can find more information, or email the Submarine Cable Protection Project subcablesenquiries@acma.gov.au.

Minister announces National Relay Service Contract

Australian Communication Exchange will continue to provide telecommunication relay services to help people with communication impairment after signing a new contract with the government to provide the service from 1 July 2006.

The Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator Helen Coonan, announced the new contract on 24 April 2006. She said that the Australian Communication Exchange will continue to provide the relay service component of the National Relay Service, but with enhanced services. These will include the introduction of an internet relay service and much stricter service level standards.

The National Relay Service provides people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment with a standard telephone service comparable to the service available to other Australians.

Australian Communication Exchange has provided the service since its inception in 1995 and is an Australian not-for-profit company employing around 200 staff with call centres in Melbourne and Brisbane.

Calls made through the National Relay Service are assisted by a relay officer. In the most common type of relayed call, the person with communication impairment types and reads the conversation using a device such as a teletypewriter and the relay officer reads the conversation of the person with communication impairment to the other person.

Under the new contract, Australian Communication Exchange will over the next year progressively introduce the internet relay service and improvements to its IT platform and systems to enable it to comply with the enhanced performance standards to apply across all its services.

The Minister also recently announced that WestWood Spice would be the new provider of the National Relay Service Outreach Program, which raises awareness and trains users of the relay service. Australian Communication Exchange will work with WestWood Spice in providing this critically important service across Australia.

ACMA is responsible for monitoring and reporting on the performance of the National Relay Service provider against the National Relay Service Plan.

More information about the National Relay Service is on the ACMA website at www.acma.gov.au (go to Consumer > Disability Services > National Relay Service).

Radio 3AW and Magic 693 swap frequencies

ACMA has varied the operating conditions of the Melbourne commercial radio services 3AW and 3EE (which currently uses the on-air identifier Magic 693) by swapping their frequencies and transmitter locations, effective from 1 May 2006.

The change, contained in a variation to the licence area plan for Melbourne radio, was made following a request from the licensee of the 3AW and 3EE services, Southern Cross Broadcasting, in December 2005. Southern Cross Broadcasting believed 3AW, with its much larger listening audience, would have improved reception, particularly in inner-city Melbourne. It was confident the switch would be well accepted and would benefit the vast majority of listeners.

The 3AW service will transmit on 693 kHz with an omni-directional radiation pattern and the 3EE service will transmit on 1278 kHz with a directional radiation pattern. Currently, 3EE operates on a lower frequency with a directional radiation pattern at a better AM transmission site compared with 3AW, which operates on a higher frequency with an omni-directional radiation pattern. Lower frequencies in the MF-AM band provide better signal propagation than higher frequencies.

The variation to the Melbourne licence area plan is on the ACMA website (www.acma.gov.au) or contact ACMA on (free call) 1800 810 241.