

# Possible extension of Sydney datacasting trial

ACMA recently sought comment on extending the digital datacasting trial currently being conducted in Sydney by Broadcast Australia. The trial, known as DIGITAL FORTY FOUR, is using one of the two unassigned digital television channels that form part of the two national digital television licences due to be allocated by ACMA in the second half of 2007.

ACMA is considering whether to extend the trial until these channels are allocated for their designated long-term use and wants to ensure that the price-based allocation process for the channels is fair, with no one bidder favoured over another. In the interim, ACMA has decided to extend the DIGITAL FORTY FOUR trial until 31 March 2007.

DIGITAL FORTY FOUR was officially launched in 2003 and incorporates:

- **LCN 4**—video program guide for all five metropolitan free to air television broadcasters and DIGITAL FORTY FOUR
- **LCN 41**—ABC News, Sport and Weather
- **LCN 44**—DIGITAL FORTY FOUR home page

- **LCN 45**—Channel NSW
- **LCN 46**—Australian Christian Channel
- **LCN 47**—Macquarie Digital
- **LCN 49**—Expo
- **LCNs 401–407**—Federal Parliament and seven associated audio channels

After a call for expressions of interest in conducting a trial in 2003, Broadcast Australia was the only formal commercial trial application. The trial of datacasting services on the unassigned channel 35 in Sydney (frequency band 575–582 MHz in the broadcasting services band) began in October 2003. The trial objectives were to:

- test the viability of datacasting as a ‘product’ in the current environment and
- determine the demand for a datacasting service with ‘public information’ (for example, from government agencies) and commercial content.

The trial was not to extend beyond 31 December 2006, the date identified in legislation as the ‘sunset date’ after which the rules for use of the spectrum would be liberalised and the statutory moratorium on new commercial television services

would end. Before that date, scheduled statutory reviews under the Broadcasting Services Act relating to the digital television regime were to examine regulatory, competition and spectrum arrangements that might apply from 2007.

In September 2006, ACMA extended the trial until 31 December 2006. Since then, the government has announced its decisions about the future use of the spectrum, transferring responsibility for decisions to allocate additional commercial television licences to the minister and confirming it is not interested in planning additional commercial television broadcasting licences at present.

The government also announced that the two unassigned television channels in each market are to be offered Australia-wide as ‘licences A and B’ through a price-based allocation process to be conducted by ACMA in 2007. Channel A will be permitted for in-home services including datacasting and narrowcasting services and in Sydney will likely use the 533–540 MHz frequency band (current

Channel 29). Channel B will be permitted for a wider range of uses such as mobile television, and will likely use the 575–582 MHz frequency band (current Channel 35).

While this has clarified the future demand for the channels, ACMA must decide whether to grant Broadcast Australia’s request to extend its current trial. Save for the datacasting trial, the channel is vacant and available until the spectrum is required for allocation for licence B. Comments on the matter of whether ACMA should extend the trial closed on 14 February 2007.

A condition of the trial licence was that the licensee (Broadcast Australia) was required to provide reports to ACMA and the government that could be made publicly available. The trial information provided by Broadcast Australia is on the ACMA website at [www.acma.gov.au](http://www.acma.gov.au).

