

New number range supports innovative communications services

To support the introduction of innovative communications services while enabling consumers to make more informed choices, ACMA has introduced a new, location-independent service type and number range.

The new service type and the 0550 number range enable greater flexibility for innovation in providing telephone services, but will give consumers clearer signals about the extent to which a service resembles a traditional telephone service.

The widespread distribution of broadband services in Australia, and globally, has led to the introduction of telecommunications services that use the internet protocol (IP) for digital transmission of voice telephony. Unlike traditional telephone services that are fixed to one location, and mobile services that are associated with an individual, IP-based services can be fixed and/or location-independent (nomadic).

The new number range will apply to certain types of location-independent voice over internet protocol (VoIP) services. However, as next generation networks are built and software and devices continue to evolve, innovation will broaden further.

Under the new arrangements, service providers will have a choice of number ranges. If a provider wishes to offer a traditional fixed telephone service or a service that is a close substitute, it will still be able to access geographic numbers, or it can diversify to the new 0550 number range.

If a service offers features that depart significantly from those traditionally expected of telephone services, ACMA expects it will be offered on the 0550 range. In particular, 0550 will be suitable in cases where a telephone service is not fixed to a particular location.

Guidelines to assist service providers in selecting the appropriate number range for the provision of IP-based services are in the *Telecommunications Numbering Plan*

1997. ACMA will monitor compliance in the use of geographic numbers for local services by service providers.

Information and advice will be provided to IP service providers to assist them in meeting their obligations as carriage service providers, while information will also be provided to consumers about the new number range. As new services are developed, ACMA will work with organisations such as

Communications Alliance to ensure that appropriate information is available.

ACMA has amended the Numbering Plan to create the new service type and the 0550 number range. The Numbering Plan sets out the framework and rules for the specification of numbers in connection with the supply of carriage services in Australia.

The changes will take effect from

31 May 2007, giving industry time to make networking and marketing preparations.

Information about the changes and the new guidelines are on the ACMA website at www.acma.gov.au (go to For licensees & industry: Licensing & regulation > Telecommunications: Telecommunications regulation > Numbering > New numbers).

For more information about applying for numbers in this new number range, contact ACMA by email to numbering@acma.gov.au or telephone 03 9963 6727.

VOIP SERVICES REPORT

The ACMA decision follows a report on the regulation of VoIP services by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA). The 2005 report found that:

- Consumers associate geographic numbers with expectations about the quality, features and pricing of their voice service. Through the Integrated Public Number Database (IPND), geographic numbers also convey location information to emergency service organisations. Geographic numbers are therefore likely to remain important for the next few years at least and any approach to numbering of VoIP services should not deliberately accelerate any erosion of the integrity of geographic numbers.
- Consumers associate geographic numbers with a location and mobile numbers with a person. The nomadicity feature of IP services has the potential to blur the boundaries between fixed and mobile services. There is an inherent tension between the desirability of personalised numbering associated with VoIP services and the well-established value of geographic numbers. The future evolution of numbering is a longer-term issue that needs to be considered in the NGN context. In the meantime a new number range to accommodate nomadic services would have value.
- Industry charging on the basis of the number dialled is established and appears to be well understood by end users; where services are diverted to other answering points or services, callers understand they will pay for the number dialled. This expectation should translate to VoIP services, whether or not a service is being used nomadically.
- VoIP technology and capabilities are different from those of the circuit-switched telephone service and consumers differ in their ability to understand and use emerging voice services. To assist consumers to make informed choices there is a need for strategies to close the information gap between those who understand VoIP or will quickly come to do so and those who are less technologically aware. As with mobile services, change will come as people become more familiar with the technology.

The report went on to make recommendations that ACMA has had regard to in making its decisions on the new number range.

- A new number range should be made available for use by VoIP service providers. This range should accommodate services that depart from the expectations of a traditional telephone service, for example, because they are intended for itinerant use, are PC-based or otherwise differ significantly from the services on other number ranges.
- Geographic numbers should continue to be made available to telecommunications carriers and other providers of services that are a close substitute for a traditional telephone service.
- In seeking number allocations, and choosing the appropriate range, prospective VoIP service providers should have regard for ACMA guidance concerning the nature and characteristics of services for which the numbers will be used ... All services would be required to comply with service requirements in the *Telecommunications Numbering Plan 1997*.

The *Examination of policy and regulation relating to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services report* is on the DCITA website at www.dcita.gov.au/communications_for_consumers/telephone_services/emerging_voice_services.