



Diverging Views Emerge in WPCS Report

During CU's annual recess, the Government released AUSTEL's final report on emerging technologies for the delivery of wireless personal communications services (WPCS).

It was just over a year since the Minister asked the regulator to investigate and report on this area, in order to inform government on emerging issues arising from the technologies.

AUSTEL's report highlights the range of issues raised by the introduction of WPCS - the technologies adopted, the standards used, the spectrum needed, and public interest issues like billing and privacy.

A subtext of the report is the divergence between the (then) Department of Transport and Communications (DTC), including the Spectrum Management Authority, and AUSTEL on a number of important issues such as standard setting and spectrum allocation.

This divergence raises the question of which advice will the Minister take: that of his own department, or that contained in the report's recommendations - advice which is based on the findings of an open public inquiry process. The new Minister remains something of an unknown quantity, but as Anne Davies pointed out in last month's CU, Michael Lee has made encouraging noises about putting the interests of the public back on centre stage.

DTC Opposed to Overview Group

In its draft report, AUSTEL had recommended the formation of a national strategic body to oversee the introduction of WPCS. The Department's submission opposed this proposal, argu-

ing that it should be left to 'industry players' to decide on whether such a body is required. By its final report, AUSTEL had apparently responded to Departmental opposition on this issue, and its recommendation was simply that AUSTEL itself should remind industry to develop WPC equipment and services 'in close consultation with users'.

The Department also suggested that AUSTEL's final report include 'greater discussion and elaboration of regulatory fundamentals' including, for example, the distinction between PACTS (Public Access Cordless Telephone Services) and PMTS (Public Mobile Telephone Services). AUSTEL's view is that such details are of 'transitory value in such a volatile and fast moving industry'.

Contentious Issues

Standards for WPCS raise important issues for both equipment and service providers and consumers. While AUSTEL's report recorded a variety of views on the number and level of standards which should be set, it agreed with almost all submitters that minimum standards must be set. The exception was DTC, which argued for a 'laissez faire' approach allowing a large number of standards to be pursued. This approach would allow the 'most viable' to survive, while the 'less able will succumb to market forces'.

Spectrum allocation - a vital issue for WPCS - was another area of disagreement between the DTC/SMA and the report. The SMA argued for spectrum allocation on a market basis. While not expressing its own view on the issue, AUSTEL recorded the views of the industry that it needed certainty for spectrum use, which a market-based allocation system might not pro-

vide. AUSTEL supported Telecom's proposals for spectrum planning principles, including allocation of specific spectrum for WPCS, and the report's recommendations contain specific recommendations on the spectrum which should be used for various WPCS.

Public interest issues raised including billing problems, particularly with the introduction of universal service telecommunication and the allocation of a telephone number to individuals. For example, if A calls B on B's universal personal telecommunications number and B is inter-state or overseas, should A or B pay for the call? A may not realise the call being made was not a local one or, conversely, B may not have wanted to receive A's call from an interstate or overseas location.

The report also canvassed privacy issues, including the privacy aspect of UPT (Universal Personal Telephone) numbers. The report said those issues could be handled within existing structures, including the yet to be formed telecommunications privacy committee.

AUSTEL'S report is a welcome discussion of all the issues raised by WPCS. At this early stage, however, the most it can do is simply raise issues; many issues cannot yet be resolved. It must be hoped that, as WPCS are developed and introduced, the processes continue to be open to public debate. □

AUSTEL, Report to the Minister for Communications: Wireless Personal Communications Services, August 1993 (released December 1993).