



Telecommunications Policy Review

The Government's comprehensive review of telecommunications policy, in the lead-up to the end of the duopoly in 1997, is about to get under way.

The Minister announced the review at the end of May, saying that the 'essential objective' of the review is that telecommunications policy 'promote the efficient use and allocation of resources to deliver benefits to the industry and consumers in terms of price and quality of service'. Specific issues to be considered include:

- The relevance of the current carrier licensing scheme post 1997; the types of new carriers that might be licensed
- Interconnect and equal access arrangements
- Consumer and social issues including universal service, privacy and numbering policy
- Ongoing development arrangements
- The future of price regulation including price caps
- Future development of technology neutral service regulation and service neutral technology regulation
- The future of AUSTEL as a specialist industry regulatory agency vis-a-vis the Trade Practices Commission or its successor body under the Hilmer recommendations.

The Minister said the review will also need to re-examine some of the concepts underlying the existing Telecommunications Act including the basis for existing carrier reservations; the distinction between basic carriage services and higher level services; dominance; discrimination; and the standard telephone concept.

The review will be directed from the Minister's office. DOCA will provide support in the conduct of the review through its Planning and Review Division, headed by Tony Shaw, First Assistant Secretary for this division.

The Minister will appoint a Telecommunications Advisory Panel (TAP), which he will chair, to advise him on issues which arise throughout the review process. On 1 July, at the Pacific Telecommunications Council, the Minister announced that he had invited the following organisations or representatives to be members of the TAP:

The Labor Party Caucus Committee on Transport and Communications; Telecom's Chief Executive Frank Blount; Optus Chief Executive Bob Mansfield; Vodafone Chief Executive John Rohan; ATUG Chair George Maltby; SPAN Chair Brian Perkins; the Business Council of Australia; Australian Information Industries Association Chair Dick Simpson; Australian Electronic Industry Association President Ron Spithill; AUSTEL Acting Chair Neil Tuckwell; Trade Practices Commission Chair Professor Allan Fels; ABA and Broadband Services Expert Group Chair Brian Johns; Federation

of Australian Commercial Television Stations representative; and ABC Chair Professor Mark Armstrong.

A consumer representative nominated by the Minister for Consumer Affairs had yet to be announced as *CU* went to press.

The Minister expects to release an Issues Paper for the review in August or September and the public and industry will be invited to comment. There will be a limited time for comment on the review of approximately one or two months.

The Minister expects the government to consider the results of the review following the 1995 Budget sitting, and any legislative changes can be introduced later in 1995.

The Review and Consumers

At a CTN seminar in August (see following story), the Minister said that broadly speaking, the Review would be looking at what the telecommunications needs and expectations of consumers and the general community are, and how these needs can be met. He highlighted some areas to be covered by the review which had particular implications for the wider community.

One key issue was whether the industry should continue to be subject to industry-specific regulation, or whether greater use should be made of commercial and trade practices law. If the latter course of action were followed, the question would be whether general consumer law, for example, would adequately protect consumer and community interest in telecommunications.

The Minister said that a prime objective of telecommunications policy must be to continue to meet the needs of individual users. All consumers are entitled to expect a reasonable level of access to services.

The Review is part of the wider debate about important social issues, and it would be deliberating within the framework of the Government's existing policies on access and equity, social justice and privacy. It would be in this context that the central issues of the USO would be considered, along with matters like accessibility and affordability of services, and specific consumer or community obligations on carriers in areas like charging and billing, content and privacy issues. □