

NO WIGGLE ROOM

The NBTC postpones 700MHz spectrum usage by telecom operators from October to January, putting DTAC in a bind. **B4**

TECHNOLOGY

NBTC defers 700MHz usage to January

Restriction puts DTAC in a bind

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The National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) has postponed 700-megahertz spectrum usage by telecom operators from October to January, citing a delay in the band's network adjustment by broadcasting network (MUX) operators for telecom use, according to an executive at a major mobile operator who requested anonymity.

Parts of the 700MHz range are being used by digital TV broadcasters to air



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EXECUTIVE AT A MAJOR MOBILE OPERATOR

TV programmes. MUX operators are in the process of adjusting the band's network to allow three mobile operators to use the spectrum.

The deferral is expected to heap pressure on Thailand's third largest mobile operator Total Access Communication (DTAC), which holds less spectrum bandwidth than its major competitors and crucially needs to use the band to broaden its network coverage.

The executive said the NBTC recently informed the three major mobile operators that they would be awarded licences to run services on the 700MHz spectrum on Jan 13 and could use the band two days afterwards.

In June 2019, the three major operators bought the three licences for the spectrum at a combined price of 56.4 billion baht. Each gained 20MHz of bandwidth at a cost of 17.6 billion baht.

The purchases came as the previous regime invoked Section 44 to let operators buy into the 700MHz band in exchange for extending 900MHz licence payment terms for another five years.

The trio are True Move H Universal Communication (TUC); DTAC; and Advanced Wireless Network Co (AWN), a subsidiary of Advanced Info Service (AIS), the top mobile operator by subscriber numbers.

The 15-year 700MHz licence mandates that operators pay for licence fees in 10 instalments.

The executive said the delay was caused by MUX operators' procurement of related equipment while its adjustment of 700MHz band network

and equipment for telecom services requires foreign experts to assist, and this cannot be done now due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"The delay may cause DTAC inconvenience, as the company needs to fight to boost its market share under a 5G marketing strategy," the executive said.

DTAC management had asked the NBTC to clarify when it could receive the licence and run the service on the 700MHz band.

The regulator responded that the spectrum's network adjustment would proceed zone by zone, starting from the South, Northeast and North, respectively.

"The adjustment was supposed to finish by August based on the original plan, but that is not possible now," said a source at the NBTC board.

The source said DTAC management then asked the regulator whether the company could start running the service on the spectrum zone by zone and make the first instalment payment according to their real usage.

The NBTC has yet to respond to the request, since there is no such a condition on the licence.

Meanwhile, TUC management told the regulator not to hurry to grant the licences in January, waiting until April, the same month when other slots on the 700MHz range won during the Feb 16 auction could be used.

At the Feb 16 auction of the 700MHz range, AWN won 40MHz of bandwidth and CAT Telecom secured 20MHz of bandwidth.