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MEDIA STATEMENT

ICASA issues temporary radio frequency spectrum to qualifying applicants in an effort to dealing with COVID-19 communication challenges

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Pretoria – The Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA/the Authority) has completed the analysis of applications that were received in response to the invitation to apply for the temporary radio frequency spectrum (RFS) assignments in terms of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) COVID-19 National Disaster Regulations (The Regulations).

The Authority has considered applications for temporary radio frequency spectrum assignments in the 700MHz, 800MHz, 2300MHz, 2600MHz and 3500MHz bands, including the use of Television Whitespaces (TVWS) in an effort to ensure connectivity for all during the National State of Disaster period.

Of all applications received, only seventeen (17) were found to be in line with the criteria and conditions outlined in Annexure A of the Regulations which, among others, required all prospective applicants (1) to provide the network performance report before the COVID-19 outbreak with the currently assigned spectrum holding; as well as (2) to provide the modelled network performance with the additional spectrum they require.

Assignment of the radio frequency spectrum in the 700/800MHz bands

The Authority noted that these bands were in demand. However, due to the fact that analogue and digital Television Broadcasting services are still operating in the 700MHz and 800MHz frequency bands, sharing and co-existence in these frequency bands would have to be implemented systematically through a geographic separation of International Mobile Telecommunication (IMT) Systems and Broadcasting Services in affected areas in accordance with the updated 2013 Terrestrial Broadcasting Frequency Plan as published.

The following applicants were assigned spectrum in these bands:

1. Telkom has been temporarily assigned 40MHz
2. MTN has been temporarily assigned 40MHz

3. Vodacom has been temporarily assigned 40MHz

Assignment of the radio frequency spectrum in the 2300MHz band

The following applicants were assigned spectrum in this band:

1. Telkom has been temporarily assigned 20MHz in addition to the 60MHz it already has in this band.
2. Vodacom has been temporarily assigned 20MHz.

Assignment of the radio frequency spectrum in the 2600MHz band

The total amount of available spectrum in this band is 170MHz. The following applicants were assigned spectrum in this band:

1. Telkom has been temporarily assigned 40MHz
2. Vodacom has been temporarily assigned 50MHz
3. MTN has been temporarily assigned 50MHz
4. RAIN Networks has been temporarily assigned 30MHz in addition to the 20MHz it already has in this band.

Assignment of the radio frequency spectrum in the 3500MHz band

The total amount of available spectrum in this band is 116MHz. As in other bands, the temporary assignments in the 3500MHz band were made on the principles of non-discrimination to all qualifying applicants. The following applicants were assigned temporary spectrum in this band:

1. Telkom has been temporarily assigned 12MHz out of the 32MHz applied for. It is important to note that Telkom is currently assigned 28MHz in the 3500MHz band and was assigned 12MHz to afford it adequate capacity spectrum to meet the demand occasioned by the pandemic during this period.
2. Vodacom has been temporarily assigned 50MHz as applied for.
3. MTN has been temporarily assigned 50MHz out of the 70MHz applied for.
4. Liquid Telecoms has been temporarily assigned 4MHz; which adds to the 56MHz it already has in this band.

Authorisation to use TVWS during the National State of Disaster

The Authority received applications from Mthintle Communications, Levin Global and Morai Solutions for the use of TVWS in the 470 – 694 MHz band.

The authorisation for use of TVWS by these applicants was granted subject to the following conditions:

1. The applicant must obtain approval from the CSIR, in conjunction with the Authority, with respect to Geo-Location Secondary Database (GLSD) connectivity for compliance with the use of TVWS in South Africa;

2. The applicant must obtain type approval certification from ICASA for its electronic communications equipment; and
3. In the event that harmful interference occurs to existing broadcasters, the applicant must immediately terminate its services and notify the Authority accordingly.

Conditions associated with the temporary spectrum assignment

All successful licensees for temporary IMT radio frequency spectrum assignments must ensure that they support and create virtual teaching and classrooms as determined by the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies in various districts during the National State of Disaster. Furthermore, all radio frequency spectrum licensees must zero rate all COVID-19 sites as identified from time to time by the Department of Health and published in the Government Gazette.

Conclusion

The Authority exercised extreme care in the assignment of this temporary spectrum to existing licensees in order to achieve the objectives of the COVID-19 Regulations which are aimed at alleviating network challenges, easing congestion and ensuring good quality of service for consumers. In most of these assignments, applicants were granted additional spectrum as applied for. However, there are a few exceptional cases where the Authority had to apply practical and non-discriminatory principles to ensure that no licensee is prejudiced.

“I would really like to express my deepest gratitude to all applicants and licensees alike; and I believe the spectrum will be used efficiently as well as optimally for the benefit of all South Africans. This will indeed bridge the communications divide during this difficult period of our lifetime”, concludes ICASA Acting Chairperson, Dr Keabetswe Modimoeng.

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