

TECHNOLOGY

TOT chipping in with SpaceX funding



Mr Morakot (right), with Mu Space founder James Yenbamroong, says the prime minister has agreed in principle with the 10-billion-baht investment.

KOMSAN TORTERM/VASANA

State telecom enterprise TOT, through collaboration with strategic satellite business partner Mu Space and Advanced Technology, plans to invest 10 billion baht in the next funding round of US rocket company SpaceX's low Earth orbit (LEO) Starlink satellite project in early 2021.

The next funding round is expected to raise US\$3 billion (93.69 billion baht).

TOT set aside an initial budget of 10 billion baht for the investment as it ventures into the global satellite business. The state telecom enterprise aims to provide gateway stations for LEO satellites, space internet data centres and space digital platforms.

PM'S GREEN LIGHT

TOT acting president Morakot Thienmontree said the state enterprise conducted a feasibility study of the investment plan starting last month.

The plan has been reported to Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, who has agreed in principle, he said.

The investment plan needs support from the Digital Economy and Society (DES) Ministry and has to be forwarded to the National Digital Economy and Society Committee (NDESC), chaired by the prime minister, for consideration.

The investment, Mr Morakot said, could be done under National Telecom (NT), a new company to be formed by the merger of TOT and CAT Telecom. The merger is scheduled to be com-

pleted early next year.

TOT and CAT have about 50 billion baht each in their coffers.

TOT plans to send a server payload on the Blue Origin rocket, which was earlier scheduled to launch into space from Texas on Sept 24. But the plan was postponed to this week on account of bad weather.

The server payload comprises web servers, Internet of Things (IoT) platforms and big data devices that have been jointly studied and tested for months.

TOT has spent 100 million baht to redevelop its existing satellite gateway station in Bangkok in the initial phase and plans to construct more in the future. The enterprise has studied

potential opportunities and tested the code through TOT's existing satellite gateway stations for months.

LEO satellites operate 500-2,000km



The investment could be done under NT.

MORAKOT THIENMONTREE
Acting president, TOT

from Earth's surface, versus traditional communication satellites, also known as geostationary satellites, which are higher up at around 36,000km. The lower orbit means lower latency in signal transmission.

LEO satellites are projected by some to have strong business potential because they can beam the internet all over the globe, including deep in the forest, high in the mountains or even the ocean, without relying on terrestrial telecom cell sites.

In August, SpaceX, founded by tech billionaire Elon Musk, raised \$1.9 billion in funding — its largest single fundraising round, bringing its total raised to \$5.4 billion.

ORBITAL SLOT BIDDING

Mr Morakot said TOT will take part in the bidding for geostationary satellite orbital slots for satellite business next year.

He said TOT and CAT Telecom are interested in the operation of the assets associated with Thaicom 4 and 6 satellites after a satellite concession contract upheld by SET-listed Thaicom expires next September. Thaicom is obliged to transfer the assets to the DES Ministry after the concession ends.

According to the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), a public hearing will be

conducted on the methods of granting the rights of orbital slot usage in November.

The move is in line with NBTC policy and the government's plan to transition the satellite business from concessions to real licensing.

Seven orbital slots are subject to be given: 50.5 degrees East, 51 E, 78.5 E, 119.5 E, 120 E, 126 E and 142 E.

The seven slots are divided into four packages. The first package consists of 50.5 E and 51 E and the second concerns 78.5 E. The third involves 119.5 E and 120 E and another concerns 126 E and 142 E.

When the reallocation of the orbital slots takes place, interested bidders must propose the orbital slot package they wish to use.

NBTC management said the first and fourth packages, which are unoccupied, are crucial and need to be used.

The 78.5 E and 119.5 E slots are being used by Thaicom.