

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

NBTC subsidising border broadband

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The telecom regulator plans to provide a three-year subsidy worth 4 billion baht for fixed broadband service to 600,000 households in border villages from May 2019, aiming to bridge the digital divide in remote areas.

The subsidy plan is part of the Universal Service Obligation (USO) project to construct a fibre-optic network, free WiFi hotspots and mobile access nodes, as well as public internet centres for 3,920 border villages in 62 provinces nationwide. The USO Net project is scheduled to be completed in March.

Takorn Tantasith, secretary-general of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), said there are 2.1 million households or 6.3 million people who live in border villages.

Of the total, more than 600,000 households or 1.8 million people are low-income, living in border villages nationwide.

Mr Takorn said the NBTC's rules require project winners to provide super-cheap internet packages at 200 baht per month with a maximum speed of 30 megabits per second (Mbps). However, 1.8 million low-income people cannot afford the fixed-broadband service.

"To reduce disparity and the digital divide in remote areas, the three-year subsidy for fixed-broadband service will directly promote digital accessibility for low-income people and provide opportunities for better quality of life and help them experience tele-education and telemedicine," he said.

Mr Takorn said that if the subsidy plan can generate increased income to low-income households of 1,000 baht per month, well-being in the segment

will improve.

The government fully supports the NBTC's subsidy plan, he said, as it will truly serve the digital policy to promote fair access to digital infrastructure.

The 600,000 households that don't receive the letter during the period can phone the NBTC centre on 1200 for details.

Under the USO Net project, the NBTC has been constructing the last mile of fibre-optic cable to all 3,920 villages. There will be 5,992 free WiFi hotspots throughout the 3,920 villages, and some villages will have more than one free WiFi hotspot.

The NBTC's USO project will see the construction of access nodes for mobile connectivity in 1,890 villages that do not have mobile connectivity.

In parallel, Mr Takorn said the NBTC is on the verge of constructing a broadband network for a further 15,732 villages that have yet to receive broadband internet access under the government's national broadband network construction project for 40,432 villages across the country.

Under the Net Pracharat project, the government plans to set up low-cost broadband infrastructure covering 40,432 villages nationwide. The first phase for 24,700 villages was handled by TOT at an investment cost of 15 billion baht.

The government assigned the NBTC to carry out the installation for the remaining 15,732 villages using the USO fund for investment.

Mr Takorn said the NBTC has already announced the winner of the project via an e-auction process and expects to sign an agreement for construction in January.

The second phase of the Net Pracharat project is scheduled to start providing network connectivity in May.