

NBTC may extend loans to operators as 5G inducement

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THE NATION

THE NATIONAL Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) is exploring the possibility of drawing on its research and development fund to make loans to telecom operators as a new financial option to encourage the operators to bid for new spectrum licences later this year.

NBTC secretary-general Takorn Tantasith said yesterday that the watchdog had its legal advisor study the possibility of making loans from the Broadcasting and Telecommunications Research and Development Fund for the Public Interest. The fund sits atop cash of around Bt40 billion.

The NBTC would explore all options, and provide all necessary support, to financially encourage the telecom operators to get the 5G service off the ground.

The watchdog wants to see 5G launched next year in Thailand. This year it intends to auction 700MHz, 2.6GHz, and the spectrum range of 26GHz-28GHz, which can be used to provide the 5G service.

Advanced Info Service (AIS) chief executive officer Somchai Lertsutiwong recently argued there was

no need for Thailand to rush commercial 5G into service this year, as there is a lack of a business-use case for it. The right time to launch the service is in the next two or three years, said Somchai.

Last month, telecom operator True said that it had no plan to participate in the 700 MHz spectrum auction. It was awaiting clarity from the government about whether it would allow the NBTC to extend the period of the company's final up-front instalment payment for its 900MHz licence.

The True subsidiary True Move H Universal Communication (TUC), and also AIS subsidiary Advanced Wireless Network (AWN), in separate 2017 requests to the junta, sought ways to allow them to extend the payment period of the final instalments of their 900MHz spectrum licences to nine instalments.

AWN and TUC are scheduled to pay the hefty final instalments of Bt59.574 billion and Bt60.218 billion, respectively, in 2020.

Takorn added that the NBTC is recalling a total of 160MHz bandwidth of 2.6GHz of the state owned public broadcaster MCOT. It will combine this amount with 30MHz of the same 2.6GHz band of the Public Relations Department and put the entire amount on auction to offer the 5G service.

In a related matter, the NBTC and Chulalongkorn University yesterday jointly kicked off the 5G AI/IOT Innovation Centre at the university's Engineering Faculty.

All five major telecom operators - Advanced Info Service, Total Access Communication (DTAC), True Corp, CAT Telecom and TOT - have supported the centre's development.

The NBTC has assigned the range of 26.5GHz-27.5GHz to the centre for the 5G-technology trial.