

OUT OF ORBIT

The DES minister sets up a panel to examine apparent irregularities in the permitting for Thaicom's satellite business. **B3**

DES panel for Thaicom permit probe

Minister baffled by decisions made

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Digital Economy and Society (DES) Minister Buddhipongse Punna-kanta has set up a panel to examine whether the permit for SET-listed satellite service provider Thaicom to rent transponder capacity from foreign satellites is running afoul of the previous cabinet resolution or the company's concession.

Thaicom's decision to seek foreign satellites' capacity came after technical errors on the Thaicom 5 satellite last December.

Mr Buddhipongse said the panel will also look at the DES management's decision-making process in relation to Thaicom 5's operations before he became minister last July.

In early 2019, Thaicom proposed installing a power supply extension system in Thaicom 5 and requested an extension of another four years for concession terms that are due to expire in September 2021.

The request was brought to the cabinet by the DES permanent secretary on Jan 29 last year.

The cabinet gave the green light to install the power supply but disagreed with the extension of the concession terms.

"Complying with the cabinet resolution is impossible for Thaicom because the additional investment is not reasonable given the remaining terms of the concession," Mr Buddhipongse said.

He said the question is why the permanent secretary did not clearly explain to the cabinet that such a resolution would be impractical. Instead, the permanent secretary received the resolution with the confidence that Thaicom would comply.

The permanent secretary indicated that Thaicom would install the power supply system by August 2020, Mr Buddhipongse said.

The permanent secretary has to clarify the matter with the panel, particularly regarding letters exchanged between the DES Ministry and Thaicom's management.

The National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission board last month passed a resolution allowing Thaicom to rent transponder capacity from foreign satellites to address the technical incident with Thaicom 5, which happened on Dec 17.

The resolution was passed based on the DES Ministry making a request for an emergency situation.

The move is meant to mitigate the risk of black screens for those who rent Thaicom's transponders, which could affect tens of millions of household satellite subscribers and 157 TV channels.

Thaicom, meanwhile, has to work with customers to migrate them to other satellites to ward off problems that could occur with Thaicom 5.

Thaicom chief executive Anant Kaewruamgvongs said technical errors were found in both Thaicom's operating and backup systems, which had been operating for 12 years, surpassing the designed lifespan.

He said the company has started moving some clients to foreign satellites.

CONCESSION VIOLATION?

Mr Buddhipongse said finding out whether the resolution allows Thaicom 5 to rent foreign satellites' capacity is important to be able to address the technical conflicts with the concession conditions.

The concessionaire is obliged to have a pair of satellites — main and backup — for satellite services.

Thaicom 5 is the main satellite and Thaicom 6 is the backup.

As Thaicom 5 looks set to be out of service due to the equipment's lifespan, whether Thaicom 6 can fill the void remains uncertain because Thaicom 6's capacity is fully used.

"Can these foreign satellites be regarded as backup satellites or not?" Mr Buddhipongse said.

The concession stipulates that the DES Ministry has the authority to force the concessionaire to repair and maintain satellites when technical errors occur, regardless of the cost.

There is no way Thaicom can claim that the repair is not worth the money, the DES minister said.