

FUZZY MATH

The DES Ministry is under fire after it sought a B7.5bn budget for five-year maintenance of village WiFi. **B3**

TECHNOLOGY

DES grilled over high WiFi scheme budget

B7.5bn for 5 years of maintenance

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The Digital Economy and Society (DES) Ministry has come under heavy fire after it sought a high budget of 7.5 billion baht for the five-year maintenance of its WiFi hotspot project covering 24,700 remote villages, known as the Net Pracharat scheme.

DES Ministry representatives were invited by a House committee on communications, telecommunications, and digital economy and society to explain its budget request on Feb 5.

A source at the event who requested anonymity said the ministry's management effectiveness was questioned because the 7.5-billion-baht budget would mean the maintenance would cost 5,000 baht per WiFi hotspot per

month, far higher than a broadband internet package in the market.

"A promotional package provided by telecom operators costs only 599 baht per month per subscription for internet broadband service," the source said.

The Net Pracharat project is the government's scheme to reduce the digital divide for those in remote areas under the country's digital transformation roadmap.

The project was divided into two phases. The first phase saw state telecom TOT assigned by the DES Ministry to install free WiFi hotspots in over 24,700 villages with a 15-billion-baht budget. The WiFi installation was completed in December 2018.

The second phase covering a further 15,732 villages was handled by the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) under its own budget for its Universal Service Obligation (USO) scheme.

Under this phase, free WiFi hotspot installation in schools,

health-promoting hospitals and public places was completed last month. The construction of community internet centres for 15,732 villages is expected to be completed by March.

Each centre must have 10 computers and staff educating people in internet usage.

NBTC secretary-general Takorn Tantasith said the agency earmarked 15 billion baht for work on the second phase.

"If it had been tasked to construct only free WiFi hotspots, it may have needed only 5 billion baht," Mr Takorn said.

Last year, the NBTC terminated three contracts with TOT under the USO project after the state telecom failed to deliver the work one year after the due date stipulated in the terms of reference.

TOT has since been blacklisted by the regulator from participating in future NBTC projects.

TOT will have to talk with the NBTC about its financial penalty for the delay.