

Icasa to license 'provisional' spectrum ahead of auction

The Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa) said on Wednesday it will license provisional radio frequency spectrum to prevent any connectivity disruptions while it finalises a permanent auction, which has been mired in court battles.



A journalist uses his mobile phone to take a picture of the 5G logo prior to the auction of spectrum for 5G services at the Bundesnetzagentur headquarters in Mainz, Germany, on 19 March 2019. Reuters/Kai Pfaffenbach

The move comes as Icasa is withdrawing temporary spectrum assigned at the start of the Covid-19 outbreak last year to help operators meet a huge surge in data demand. That spectrum must be returned by operators by the end of this month.

The withdrawal led to a public outcry by industry players, already facing a spectrum crunch, and caused mobile operator Telkom - supported by MTN and Vodacom - to file court papers against the withdrawal. Icasa had said it would oppose it.

On Wednesday Icasa said it believes that it is in the best interest of the public to have a provisional spectrum licensing arrangement in place over the next seven months to enable all other licensing processes to conclude while mitigating any possible service disruptions.

"Icasa is not a spectrum-hoarding regulator," its chairperson, Keabetswe Modimoeng, said. He added that the provisional licensing arrangement is an improved pro-competitive interim measure.

"This provisional arrangement is tailored to deal with any network issues which may affect the provision of services to consumers in the intervening period," Modimoeng said.

The bands available for licensing from 1 December to 30 June 2022, or three months after the termination of the National State of Disaster, are 700 megahertz (MHz), 800MHz, 2300MHz, 2600MHz and 3500MHz.

Icasa said it will make a final decision on the successful applicants by no later than 26 November. Interested operators will, amongst others, pay an application fee, an acquisition fee and the spectrum licence fee.

The permanent licensing process - of auctioning long-term spectrum - was delayed by legal wrangling, after Telkom and broadcaster eMedia Holdings argued the auction process was flawed and obtained a court order to suspend it.

With the legal wrangling resolved, Icasa aims to restart the auction process next March.

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