

Commission seeks unity on radio spectrum ahead of UN conference

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Spectra [\[Yann Caradec/Flickr\]](#)

SPECIAL REPORT: The European Commission this week (12 January) launched a consultation on radio spectrum in a bid to unify member states and stakeholders behind a common EU position on radio spectrum liberalisation ahead of a key UN conference in November.

The EU executive will have to deal with conflicting interests of broadcast and telecommunications industries in addition to member states keen to protect national interests on spectrum.

The World Radiocommunication Conference (WRC) – conducted by the International Telecommunications Unions (ITU), a Geneva-based UN agency – will review and revise global spectrum rules, which are needed to prevent interference between broadcast and telecommunications users in different countries.

The EU executive has asked stakeholders to give their views on the options proposed in a [report](#) on the issue presented by former Commissioner Pascal Lamy in September 2014.



700 MHz band

The Lamy Report sets out a strategy to resolve broadcasters and mobile operators rival claims for the Ultra High Frequency (UHF) spectrum, which is a finite resource. It is mostly used for broadcasting, mobile broadband and wireless microphones.

While the two industries have agreed that the 700 MHz band, currently used by TV broadcasters, should be given over to wireless broadband, they cannot agree how and when.

The location of the 700 MHz band gives it excellent propagation characteristics, according to America's Federal Communications Commission (FCC). This allows the 700 MHz signals to penetrate buildings and walls easily, and to cover larger geographic areas with relatively less infrastructure.

The European Commission consultation on how to allocate the prized band will run until 12 April 2015 and will help the Commission define a common position in the area of spectrum management.

Lamy's report recommended that broadband should have exclusive use of the 700 MHz band of the European Union's Ultra High Frequency spectrum by 2020.

In return, terrestrial broadcasters should be guaranteed the remaining UHF spectrum below 700 MHz (470-694 MHz) until 2030, Lamy suggested.

Lamy report - a pathfinder for Geneva conference

EU, national and international regulatory stability for broadcasters must be safeguarded, the report said.

Europe should reject any international plans at 2015's World Radiocommunication Conference to give the 470-694 MHz band over to mobile, it added.

Lamy also backed a review by 2025, so the EU executive can take any new technology or market developments into account.

The former EU Trade Commissioner and World Trade Organisation chief, Lamy spent six months discussing the issue with a group of broadcasters, network operators, mobile companies and tech associations before making his recommendations.

Broadcasters and telecoms operators remain divided on the issue however.



Reacting to the Commission's consultation launch, a statement from Broadcast Network Europe (BNE) – a federation representing the interests of terrestrial broadcast network operators – supported Lamy's recommendation that the frequency band 470-694 MHz should remain available for terrestrial broadcasters.

But BNE's members "remain concerned by their possible displacement from the 700 MHz band," the statement continued, citing as reasons "the complexity and challenges associated with reorganising the networks across Europe to accommodate today's services in less spectrum than is currently utilised".

Debate pitches terrestrial broadcast against telecommunications industries

By contrast, Erzsébet Fitori, the director of the European Competitive Telecommunication Association (ECTA), a group representing the telecoms sector, welcomed the report.

"More harmonisation and coordination at the European level would be particularly useful as new spectrum is being freed up for mobile communications, provided that European rules foster competition," Fitori said.

"Competition is the best driver of investments and innovation, which is why spectrum decisions should be pro-competitive and avoid squeezing viable challenger operators out of the market," according to Fitori.

Mobile phone operators do not use the spectrum they already have allotted and forcing broadcasters to change the radio frequencies they currently use could imperil coverage of key sporting events and major spectacles such as the FIFA Football World Cup and Eurovision Song Contest, one member of Lamy's own group told EurActiv last summer (23 July).

"The mobile industry has a great deal more spectrum to play with. About 1000 MHz has already been identified for the mobile service in Europe, where they have the capacity to do more. I don't actually think they have made full use of what they have already got," Simon Fell, the director of technology and innovation for the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), told EurActiv in an interview.

>> **[Read: Broadcaster: Spectrum debate threatens World Cup and Eurovision Song Contest](#)**

Even if a common position can be agreed the EU executive will not be able to guarantee that the bloc speaks with one voice on the issue at the WRC.



The European Commission provides guidance for regulators who attend such meetings. The actual administrations of the countries still decide what is happening within their borders. If they choose to use the entire spectrum they've got for TV or mobiles, they can do so.

Houlin Zhao, the ITU's new secretary general, told EurActiv in an interview that the organisation would stage preparatory meetings in Geneva to pave the way for the November conference.

Zhao acknowledged however that the ITU was preparing several compromise fall-back plans in case a bold unified position cannot not be agreed among the ITU's 193 member states.

Timeline:

- **March 2015:** Preliminary meeting set to take place in Geneva under the auspices of the International Telecommunications Union
- **Nov. 2nd-Nov. 27th:** World Radio Conference (WRC) 2015 taking place in Geneva