GLOBAL REGULATIONS

By Gerry Oberst

Green Satellite Update

This column noted in May that the satellite industry was starting to make the case that it is environmentally responsible against the backdrop of the concern over climate change. Satellite services are used extensively for environmental services such as global monitoring and rely on environmentally-friendly solar power once in orbit.

This type of debate is not going away, as it seems that the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is in the process of adopting a resolution on "Telecommunication /ICT and Climate Change" that will continue to put the issues squarely on the table. Neither the satellite sector nor any other particular sector is mentioned in the resolution, but this ITU effort likely will cause all industry sectors to defend their green credentials.

At the time this column was written, countries were submitting proposals for the ITU's World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly (WTSA-08), scheduled for October in Johannesburg. Already by late summer, countries had strongly supported a resolution on information and communication technologies (ICT) and climate change at the meeting.

For instance, the European countries submitted a document, originally drafted by the United Kingdom, favoring such a resolution. The paper does not identify which European countries stand behind it, but it nonetheless sets out strong language on why a resolution is needed.

The Europeans say that although ICT contribute only an estimated 2.5 percent of total greenhouse gases at the moment, that proportion will grow as ICT use expands faster than the general economy. "ICTs are thus part of the cause of global warming," say the Europeans, "but they can also be part of the solution, for instance through the promotion of carbon displacement technologies."

Some of this language is already boilerplate on the ITU Web site, because this issue is not new to the ITU. The European paper tracks the ITU involvement with environmental issues back to 1994, when an ITU Plenipotentiary Conference adopted a resolution on these matters. Taking account of this and subsequent developments, the Europeans call for another resolution in support of doing more in the environmental cause.

After numerous introductory clauses, the draft resolution would charge the ITU's Standardization Bureau to create "a repository and knowledge base on the relationships between telecommunication/ICTs and climate change." It would invite the ITU "to identify opportunities for new applications using ICTs to reduce the impact of climate change and to urgently bring into effect innovative solutions." Among other items it also would call on the ITU "to define goals and best practice in developing and applying ICTs in tackling both mitigation and adaptation in all economic sectors."

This approach is defined as being part of a larger effort, including upcoming U.N. Climate Change conferences in Poznan, Poland (early December) and Copenhagen, Denmark (late November to mid-December 2009).

The Europeans were not the only participants to the WTSA to stress this environmental angle. Japan and the Asia-Pacific Telecommunity issued documents in which 11 Asian countries supported a resolution to study the issues. Brazil submitted that the ITU needs to get more involved and said it would seek a consolidated unified inter-American position in support of a resolution.

In any event, the ITU already is in the thick of things on environmental issues:

- In April and June, the ITU sponsored symposia in Kyoto and London on ICT climate change topics. Lots of industry was represented; satellite was not.
- In July, the ITU announced it had set up a new focus group to work on how ICTs can assist in cutting emissions in industry sectors such as energy, transportation and buildings. That focus group met in Geneva in September. The mobile and wireless industries were represented. Satellite was not.
- Also in September the ITU released a paper on the climate impact of next-generation networks. The report describes numerous techniques that other industry sectors can use to be more efficient, but the sole reference to satellite use is that it can be efficient in rural areas.

The issues are moving forward, and the WTSA resolution will only add more impetus. But so far there is not a lot of visible satellite sector input, other than to describe satellite monitoring services.

The bottom line for the satellite industry is whether it will participate in these activities and refine the good story it has to tell or let the topic pass it by. ◢

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