



## Sun sinks slowly on analogue

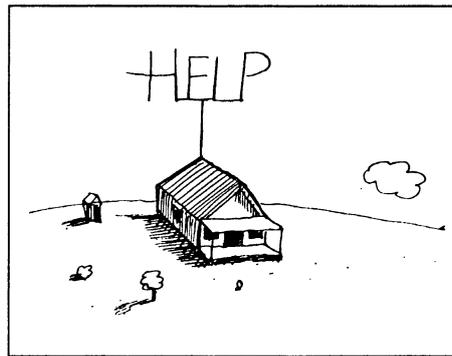
*The Spectrum Management Agency is preparing the way for the closure of analogue mobile phone services.*

The Spectrum Management Agency (SMA) has emerged from a meeting in Canberra on 23 August with industry, regulatory and public interest groups, with a brief from meeting participants to coordinate a management plan for the closure of the AMPS (analogue) band of the radiofrequency spectrum, which is to be closed by 1 January 2000. The meeting included representatives from the three mobile service carriers, the ACCC, ATUG, the TIO, the Consumers Telecommunications Network and the National Farmers Federation.

The SMA informed the meeting of its intention to phase out the use of the spectrum nationally during the period up to the closure date, but to continue the service up to 2000 in all locations where an analogue service is currently provided. After this time, the 2.7 million analogue users who wish to continue a mobile phone service will need to connect with a GSM (digital) network, which currently supports approximately one quarter that number. If the SMA's plans are approved by the Minister, it will end speculation that the government may retain the analogue service in some rural and remote areas where the GSM service does not reach.

The reason for the analogue phase-out is that in 1992, following an AUSTEL report, the government elected to adopt GSM in preference to AMPS as the standard for mobile telephony. At that time, GSM was in a relatively embryonic stage of development, and it was thought likely to emerge as a better technology. It is also asserted that GSM was considered to assist the aims of a competitive environment, for while AMPS

was designed with two bands (although both are used by Telstra's MobileNet service), the GSM service can accommodate up to five competing carriers.



Although many users now argue for the retention of the AMPS bands in areas where GSM provides inadequate coverage, the Government faces apparently insurmountable pressure from GSM carriers not to do so. Optus and Vodafone paid large licence fees to operate GSM services, and have since committed considerable investment in reliance on the government's commitment to close the AMPS band.

### Priority issues

At the meeting, the following priority issues were identified:

- the development of a management plan for the phasing out of the AMPS band, in consultation with those organisations present at the meeting;
- the expansion of AUSTEL's quality of service criteria covering the AMPS and GSM bands of spectrum.
- the determination by AUSTEL's Numbering Advisory Committee of an implementable number portability solution;
- the resolution of existing prob-

lems of interference associated with the GSM service, such as that experienced by users of hearing aids; and

- maintenance of an amount of spectrum to act as a 'buffer' in the possible event of the GSM band becoming congested.

On the latter point, participants stressed the need for spectrum that is to be withdrawn not to be allocated for other purposes until it is certain that it is not needed during the phasing out process.

The telecommunications industry is keenly awaiting the Government's plans for the use of the vacated 800 MHz band, not the least because this will affect bidding strategies for the forthcoming auction of the 1.8 GHz band. The SMA has acknowledged that this auction, planned for the second half of next year, cannot proceed until this matter is settled (see 'PCS: the upwardly mobile phones' in this issue).

Regarding the timing of number portability, the immediate issue is not whether portability can be achieved by 2000, but whether an adequate plan can be developed in sufficient time to allow for the solution to be used to aid transition of users to GSM preceding the analogue sunset. Such publicity must be accompanied by a widespread education campaign - whose timing must surely need to be a matter of negotiation with the carriers, industry associations and consumer organisations - advising people of the impending AMPS closure.

The parties to the Canberra meeting will meet again in late November to monitor progress on the priority issues, then again in April next year and thereafter as needed AG