

The business of setting Standards

After a report highlighting “excessive” cabling regulation in Australia, the National Electrical and Communications Association is to seek approval for its recommendations for new industry Standards

Cabling regulation is adding to the cost of voice and data communications products in Australia, according to a report commissioned and released by the National Electrical and Communications Association (NECA).

The report was carried out because members of NECA's Communications Council industry body had expressed concern that product approval regulation was inhibiting efficient telecommunications business conduct. It revealed that the complexity of current regulations for new product approvals is delaying and in some cases, obstructing the market release of new hi-tech cables and cabling products in Australia.

Recently retired Deputy Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman, Wally Rothwell, compiled the report following a series of interviews with representatives of manufacturers, suppliers, installers, industry associations and government - those most affected by what NECA sees as excessive regulation.

Australia's voice and data communications cabling industry is worth roughly \$1.57 billion and has grown at about 25% in each of the past two years, according to NECA. The volume of product sold in the industry is estimated at \$500 million a year although Australia's share of the international telecommunications market is estimated at no more than one percent.

Regulation is set by Standards developed by the Australian Communications Industry Forum (ACIF) and are published by Standards Australia and mandated by the Australian Communications Authority (ACA).

Chief executive officer of NECA Peter Glynn said that the report found that difficulties stemmed largely from the Standards setting process. The effects of this were then seen in subsequent conformance testing, approval and labelling of cable products.

According to Mr Glynn, the difficulties were “the legacy of the earlier Standards set up by Austel in 1990 which, understandably, were influenced significantly by the previous Telecom [Telstra] requirements”.

The report made several recommendations for the amendment of product approval regulations. Those for immediate action state that:

- Standards committees be instructed to draw together all international Standards and list them without amendments, to apply in Australia in replacement of the current Standards, perhaps within three months;
- a process be drafted that a US flammability standard for the purpose of compliance with Australian requirements; and
- products are to be labelled but to overseas requirements, provided they are to the UL Standard benchmark and are accepted for the purpose of compliance with Australian regulations.

For resolution within three months, the major recommendations are that:

- confirmation be sought from ACIF that the unique Standards issues will be rectified;
- the industry should consider the possibilities for the best format for Australian cabling Standards, given the desire of NECA members that only international Standards be used where possible and minimal Australian-only requirements;
- the format of TS 3080 [technical standard] might be a good example. Or deriving a Standard for a particular product by listing the relevant international Standards

for either US or European manufacture;

- if and when Australian-only requirements must be included in a Standard, a means of reporting, vetting and public explanation of the reason for such inclusion should be devised;
- agreement should be reached on the best way to ensure that self-interest is not reflected in the outcomes of the Standards committees;
- the government might be urged to ensure that a Mutual Recognition Agreement or similar agreement be reached with the US so that mutual attestations of conformity can be made by approved US authorities and vice versa;
- the Labelling Instrument, LN2, should be examined and proposals made to the ACA that will eliminate some of the ambiguities and problems;
- consideration should be given to the possibility of reviving a system similar to the previous Certified Components List - i.e. a government-funded database of certified cabling products, perhaps even all telecommunications products - to be provided by the ACA on its website;
- high level meetings between the major players act as a preliminary to further discussions on more specialised matters;
- there should be discussion on the issue of audits for cabling products. Perhaps a “selective” process based on reports of improper practice; and
- a review of participation on Standards committees should perhaps be done as a matter of course, on a routine basis.

At the end of the report, NECA states that the review does not recommend an “open slather” approach to Standards. “It is not suggested that Australia should do away with Standards, strict conformance certification and essential labelling. Rather, it suggests a rationalisation of the processes on a more international basis, which might simplify manufacturing, supply, installation and export”.

NECA's next step is to seek confirmation from ACIF, through the relevant committees, and the ACA that the unique Standards issues will be rectified.

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