

## **Mobile operators cross connections over 11-digit number plan**

Differences are growing among mobile operator lobbies over a government proposal to introduce an 11-digit access code in place of the existing 10-digit code from January 2010 for mobile services to accommodate a rapidly growing subscriber base.

Meanwhile, the government has also amended the national numbering plan to allow sub-levels of 8 to be used as access codes for mobiles. This means that from February 9 this year, mobile numbers may also start with the number 8.

The need for a new numbering plan has arisen because India's mobile subscriber base has grown at a faster pace than expected. The numbering plan that is applicable now was formulated in 2003 on a forecast of 50 per cent tele-density by 2030. This made numbering space available for 750 million telephone connections, comprising an anticipated 300 million basic and 450 million cellular mobile connections.

With India adding over 10 million mobile subscribers every month, the country is already just short of 400 million mobile subscribers and the telecom penetration level stands at over 37 per cent. Therefore, the Department of Telecommunication (DoT) has had to re-examine plans to accommodate more subscribers.

GSM-technology service providers, which account for the bulk of mobile services in the country, welcomed the addition of the 8 level but objected to the 11-digit numbering plan, saying it would inconvenience incumbent subscribers.

“The increase of one digit in the existing numbers is unnecessary; there is a sufficient quota of numbers. The opening up of the sub-levels of 8 has also created new options for numbering,” said T V Ramachandran, Director General, Cellular Operators' Association of India (COAI), the GSM operators' lobby which represents such service providers as Bharti and Vodafone.

COAI has contended that in addition to the 98, 99, 93, 94, 92 and 97 codes in use by mobile phone operators, the 91 code is vacant and can be used as can the 96 code, which was meant for pagers.

Also, DoT has allocated exclusive two-digit codes to three operators — 92 for Tata Tele, 93 for Reliance Communications and 94 for BSNL (all three provide CDMA and GSM services), a move that has also been opposed by COAI since other operators do not have exclusive codes. “DoT should also open up these numbers,” said Ramachandran.

Agreeing with COAI, telecom analyst Mahesh Uppal said, “Although 11 digits mean that you have nine billion more numbers to allot, it also means that it is more inconvenient for the consumer at the end of the day”, especially since the existing 400 million-odd subscribers will also have to change their numbers.

“Other options like the 8 sub levels should also be explored to avoid confusion,” he added.

CDMA operators, however, say opening up sub-levels of 8 is not enough for the industry that adds over 10 million subscribers to its base every month and an 11-digit numbering is necessary.

“There are already about eight established players in the telecom space and at least three more will be added during the year, so we will need more numbers to cater to the expanding mobile subscriber base,” said S C Khanna, secretary general of CDMA lobby Association of Unified Service Providers of India.

This is not the first time phone numbers will be modified in recent years. A few years ago, the government had added the number 2 in front of all BSNL and MTNL fixed line phones across the country.