JRC Briefing for Committee Stage of Digital Economy Bill

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Key Points

- JRC supports the amendment proposed by the Federation of Communication Services (FCS) at end Page 19, Line 24 (as detailed below).
- In considering the Digital Economy Bill, Parliament needs to consider the public benefit of reserving a small amount of radio spectrum for use by the critical infrastructure to safeguard and protect our way of life, compared to the incremental benefit of using this spectrum to provide more entertainment services and marginally quicker broadband communications.
- On 8 July 1997 [Official Report, House of Lords, 18 July 1997; Vol. 581, c. 559.], during the passage of the Wireless Telegraphy Bill which introduced the concept of spectrum trading into the UK, the Government gave the assurance "that it is not our intention that the introduction of spectrum pricing should affect the access of utilities to the radio spectrum that they require." [Official Report, House of Lords, 18 July 1997; Vol. 581, c. 597 also refers.]
- Similarly, during the Committee Stage on 11 & 13 November 1997, Michael Fallon MP commented "The safe use of gas is, of course, crucially dependent on the rapid response of the gas emergency services … The safe and continuous delivery of electricity is now considered essential to daily domestic life". Responding for the Government, the Minister Barbara Roche stated "I entirely agree that the utilities, emergency services and the Environment Agency all perform vital safety of life services on which quality of life, and even safety of life, may depend. I also fully understand their dependence on radio for efficient communications, and that that is essential to the prompt and effective execution of their duties." She continued, "I therefore agree that it is right – indeed essential – that those services should continue to have access to the frequencies that they need to carry out their functions; I say that clearly and plainly. I am happy to repeat the assurance that the introduction of spectrum pricing should not affect the access of essential services to the radio spectrum they require."
- JRC expects this commitment to be honoured in the Digital Economy Bill 2010 to safeguard the operation of gas and electricity networks.
- As we move to a more interconnected society based around communications technology, the interdependence of the underlying electricity networks and communications must not be overlooked. It is not in the consumer/citizen's interest for the integrity of the electricity supply network to be compromised by the lack of resilient communications infrastructure.

Proposed amendment by FCS (supported by JRC) at end Page 19, Line 24

Ofcom must set aside a spectrum band or bands commensurate with the requirements of the UK Critical National infrastructure in addition to spectrum not less than 15 MHz in total and lying within that part of the spectrum that is expected, under Council recommendation 10141/09 or subsequent proposals to be agreed upon for the extension of European emergency service access.

Ofcom may not release any of the spectrum so set aside unless it sets aside equivalent spectrum or determines after due consultation that such spectrum for the CNI or emergency services have no reasonable likelihood of requiring spectrum to be released

Use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to support strategic objectives for the energy sector to deliver climate change obligations.

EXTRACTS FROM DECC (Department of Energy and Climate Change) publication: "Smarter Grids: the Opportunity" December 2009

Page 1: "The transition to a low carbon economy will involve major changes to the way we supply and use energy; transforming our electricity system lies at the heart of these changes. Integral to this transformation will be an electricity grid that is fitted with more information and communications technology progressively over time."

Page 15: "A digital communications infrastructure will be central to building greater intelligence onto the network. Additional to this will be a new layer of monitoring, communications and control software, integrated with existing systems, as well as additional hardware such as sensors, monitors, communication devices and smart meters."

Background on JRC

A. JRC Ltd is a joint venture between the UK electricity and gas industries specifically created to manage the radio spectrum allocations for these industries used to support emergency and safety critical operations.

B. JRC manages blocks of VHF and UHF spectrum for Private Business Radio applications and for telemetry & telecontrol services. JRC created and manages national cellular plans for co-ordinating frequency assignments for a number of large radio networks.

C. The VHF and UHF frequency allocations managed by JRC support telecommunications networks to keep the electricity and gas industries in touch with their field engineers throughout the country. The networks provide comprehensive geographical coverage to support the installation, maintenance and repair of plant in all weather conditions on a 24 hour/365 days per year basis.

D. JRC's Scanning Telemetry Service is used by radio based System Control And Data Acquisition (SCADA) networks which control and monitor safety critical gas and electricity industry plant and equipment throughout the country. These networks provide resilient and reliable communications at all times to unmanned sites and plant in remote locations to maintain the integrity of the UK's energy generation, transmission and distribution systems.

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