

ESOA Chief Plans Active Lobbying Year

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[Satellite News 02-04-09] **European Satellite Operators Association (ESOA)** Secretary General Aarti Holla-Maini is preparing for a busy year as she looks to lobby the European Commission (EC) to provide funds to help satellite broadband initiatives in rural areas across Europe. The lobbying effort will intensify following a Jan 28 EC announcement that 1 billion Euros (\$1.3 billion) under the European Economic Recovery Plan has been earmarked to get rural areas online.

Holla-Maini told *Satellite News* this announcement was a nine out of 10 in terms of significance to the satellite industry. "With the original proposal made by the [EC's directorate-general] Information Society, the satellite sector came as close as it ever has done to seeing dedicated funds for satellite broadband. Even though it is now the [EC's directorate-general] Agriculture who will be managing the process, satellites are key to last mile connectivity. Some operators have made substantial investment in broadband, so this move is of particular interest to them," she said.

The switch in oversight from the **Information Society** to the **Agriculture and Rural Development Department**, could be a stumbling block, says Holla-Maini. "I have heard from sources in DG Agriculture that broadband is not their priority, but that the subject has been pushed by DG Information Society. No matter where it came from, it is about time the unconnected users in the EU (European Union) were given proper attention and the Recovery Plan sets this out as a relatively short-term objective. [Information Society] is well aware of the role satellite can play, so I hope it maintains the pressure and gets this message to DG Agriculture."

Persuading the head of Agriculture about the merits of satellite solutions may well not be easy. "DG Agriculture manages agriculture and rural development generally. They may not be thinking about connecting the unserved user in the short term, which is central to the EU's Recovery Plan in the broadband context," Holla-Maini said. "We would not want the urgency of the approach to be lost with member states simply putting the recovery funds into their national broadband strategies without homing in on connecting those with no connectivity whatsoever today."

Promoting Satellite Strength

Member states will develop their own rural development plans and present them to the EC in June, with decisions being made in March or April 2009. This gives satellite players time to state their case.

"In those regional development plans, member states should, we believe, be identifying what their priorities are, identifying the regions they intend to connect, possibly how they intend to do," Holla Maini said. Further, they may say whether they just intend to connect households and users or whether they are thinking about innovative projects involving schools, hospitals, post offices and so on. The EC has to consider to what extent those plans are in line with the objectives set by Council in the Recovery Plan. We hope that Member States will recognise the difference that satellites can make to their remotest regions. We will be working on this in the coming months."

Given the short-term objectives of the EC, the ESOA is not planning to propose using the funds to develop new satellites for broadband connectivity, Holla-Maini said. "We are talking about is using capacity already in orbit or due to launch in 2009-10 for short-term connectivity," she said. "The difference between satellite connectivity and the ADSL customer is the cost of installation and equipment. This is not paid by the customer served by ADSL where the copper line is already present, and the modem is generally leased for free. This is probably the most appropriate place for any financial contribution to filter down to."

Holla-Maini is excited about the challenge that lays ahead for the ESOA in terms of lobbying for these funds. "This is a tough challenge but it is nice to be able to make our case with a DG that does not know us. Unlike Galileo, where every industry player has had face time with every Commission official involved in the program, with DG Agriculture, we start with a clean sheet. They may not know what satellites can do for their sector — whether generally for farmers and agriculture or specifically for rural development and broadband."

It is not about all the monies going to satellite. "We are not suggesting that the entire 1 billion Euros should be for satellite, even with a proportion of those funds, as was originally proposed by DG [Information Society], a substantial difference can be made," Holla-Maini said. "The unconnected in Europe are only a few percent but in terms of users, they amount to a few million. A satellite contribution can already make headway in reducing this number and the EC wants to see results in the next year."

Satellites "provide a universality of service that can be a real and complementary solution to Europe's geographical divide, cutting across borders and covering the entire continent. I hope the Commission will recognize this in any guidelines it issues to member states," Giuliano Berretta, Eutelsat CEO and chairman of the ESOA, said.