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Department of Telecommunications may use Telecom Regulatory Authority of India's data to reach uncovered areas

By [Kalyan Parbat](#), ET Bureau | 28 Jul, 2014, 04.05AM IST



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KOLKATA: The [Department of Telecommunications](#) (DoT) will shortly ask the sector regulator to determine which areas remain outside mobile coverage ahead of the next spectrum auction.

It's likely to use the data collated by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) to design the next airwaves sale more effectively, especially with regard to rural rollout obligations for spectrum winners, a top official aware of the matter told ET.

DoT plans to use Trai's inputs to measure India's "unique mobile subscriber" [penetration](#) and also review the effectiveness of existing telco rollout obligations. It is keen to quantify unique subscribers as the "number of mobile connections" can be a misleading indicator of penetration since a subscriber can have multiple SIM cards.

Moves to address the issue could also [mean](#) mobile service providers having to step up investment, which would add to the pressure on finances at companies already burdened by high spectrum costs and having to keep tariffs low because of competition.

Trai's assessment of gaps in coverage will exclude the northeastern circles, where it has already concluded that some 9,000 villages have no mobile connectivity. The exercise comes at a time

when sections within DoT have voiced concern about India's "very modest 40% rural tele-density levels".

The National Telecom Policy 2012 seeks to increase India's 40% rural tele-density levels to 70% by 2017 and 100% by 2020. Accordingly, the possibility of telcos being asked to meet 80-100% of their rural tele-density targets within defined timelines as part of their contractual obligations is not being ruled out.

Trai's inputs may prove handy in designing the next round of spectrum auctions, said [Mahesh Uppal](#), director of Com First (India) — a consultancy dealing in telecom regulatory affairs.

"Accurate and robust data will be invaluable to estimate India's rural mobile coverage. It can also be useful for designing future auctions as it will help specify realistic rollout obligations for telcos that win spectrum through those auctions," he said.

DoT is learnt to have internally estimated that there are nearly "40,000 uncovered villages" across India (excluding those in the Northeast) and the cost of provisioning **2G** coverage in these regions would be upwards of Rs 11,000 crore, a [departmental official](#) said.