

DoT Panel Recommends Mass Solar Cell Towers for BSNL

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A telecom department (DoT) panel has recommended that state-run telecom company Bharat Sanchar Nigam (BSNL) be tasked with expediting mass solarisation of its cell towers in India's power-strapped rural zones with support from Universal Services Obligation Fund (USOF).

The proposal is seen as the first step by the government to address the telecom sector's concerns about the prohibitive capex costs of deploying green energy technologies like solar for powering cell towers in line with the DoT's green telecom policy unveiled in January 2012.

In an internal note seen by ET, the DoT panel has recommended that "USOF money be used for solarisation of towers in rural areas that suffer from acute power shortage", adding that the mandate be "given to BSNL due to its expertise in managing vast telecom infrastructure in rural areas".

The DoT panel has advocated USOF funding as "₹24,801 crore is available in the USOF kitty", which it feels can be used in development of rural communications through installation of solar power units in BSNL's telecom towers.

The DoT panel has sought the USOF Administrator's views on financing the proposed solarisation exercise.

Sources close to USOF, however, claimed that adequate funds may not be available since over ₹24,000 crore is earmarked for the national broadband project and mobile rollouts in regions prone to Left wing extremism. At present, BSNL runs some 70,000-odd mobile towers and a sizeable chunk are in rural areas.

"We would like to initially undertake solarisation of tower sites in Bihar, Jharkhand, UP, Assam and Northeast, which suffer crippling power cuts after we get a fix on the scale of the project and quantum of USOF support since solar deployments are highly capex-intensive and not commercially viable without support," said a top BSNL official.

India's 'Go Green' policy mandates telecom firms to run 75% of its mobile towers in rural areas on hybrid power by 2020.