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| Publication: | The Economic Times | Page No: | 07 |
| Place: | | Date: | 07.01.2014 |

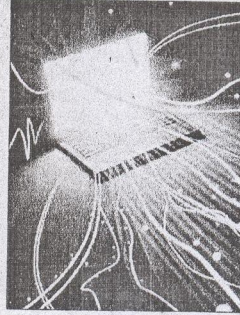
BSNL, PowerGrid, RailTel Get Cracking on Optic Fibre Project

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Bharat Sanchar Nigam, Power Grid Corp of India and RailTel are in various stages of evaluating and floating multiple tenders linked to cable laying and trenching operations of the ₹21,000-crore national optic fibre network (NOFN) project. The comments by the Universal Services Obligation Fund (USOF) came in response to a query by Rajya Sabha MP and former owner of BPL Mobile, Rajeev Chandrasekhar on the status of the project. The USOF is an independent telecom department arm that will finance NOFN rollout, which is the communications ministry's biggest telecom venture for taking high-speed internet to the hinterlands. Cable laying and trenching is the most expensive capex piece likely to be upwards of ₹10,000 crore.

BSNL, PowerGrid and RailTel have been mandated to handle cable laying and trenching responsibilities of the national broadband venture in the 70:15:15 ratio. Bids relating to ducting are also under evaluation by the three state-run companies, the USOF adds. The USOF has, however, attributed the time-overrun to the challenges of implementing a "mega project that is widely dispersed across the country", as per an internal telecom department note seen by ET.

"It may be difficult to adhere to timelines stipulated by the Cabinet Committee on Infrastructure (CCI) for completing the NOFN project, given the challenges of reaching fibre to rural and re-



mote areas across the country," says the USOF in its response to the query. So much so, the Telecom Commission has sought CCI approval for a two year extension, instead of the original October 2013 deadline. In its response, USOF has also noted that the survey work for as many as 2.36 lakh gram panchayats (GP) has been concluded out the total 2.5 lakh GPs.

"BSNL will handle survey work in 1,73,910 GPs while PowerGrid and RailTel will do 36,047 GPs and 35,791 GPs respectively".

The USOF has also informed Chandrasekhar that Bharat Broadband Network is set to finalise contracts for buying optical fibre cables and "GPON" devices that carry voice, data and video signals over broadband networks at super speeds.

BBNL is a special purpose vehicle that is implementing the NOFN project. Such Gigabit Passive Optical Network (GPON) systems are used for taking high-speed Internet to the hinterlands to expand the broadband penetration.