

Anti-Monopoly Official Faults Federal Fund

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Federal Anti-Monopoly Service deputy director Anatoly Golomolzin on Tuesday slammed a state-run fund that collects "huge" money from telecom operators.

The Universal Service Reserve should spend the money differently from supporting payphones and collective Internet access points, he said.

People often don't know where they can look for cards to use the public phones, he argued.

"Any of you will tell me you don't know where they are on sale," he told reporters at a news conference. No one disagreed.

The fund, which reimburses operators for running the payphones and public Internet-access points, should focus on other efforts that include making the costs of Internet providers more or less equal across the country, he said. Surfing the net is now more expensive in the Far East

than in western Russia, he said.

Golomolzin also suggested again — after first voicing the idea last month — that cellular operators should be able to vie for the reimbursements if they provide the service in remote areas.

Telecom companies chip in 1.2 percent of their revenues every year to fill the fund, he said.

"This fund raises huge money," he said without naming a number. "We believe the spending of this money is irrational."

The fund spent 14 billion rubles (\$429 million) on reimbursements in 2010, according to news reports last fall.

Golomolzin stated that the fees paid into the fund must remain so high "for the time being."

The fund could have bankrolled the construction of cellular towers and the electricity lines to feed them around the federal highway that connected Chita and Khabarovsk in the Far East a couple of years ago, he said. Instead, the trio of major cellular operators — VimpelCom, MegaFon and MTS — joined forces to build the infrastructure, he said.

There are 148,302 payphones and 20,847 public Internet-access points across Russia as of this month.

Golomolzin, who also oversees the oil industry, said he was confident that gasoline prices would remain stable on the domestic market through the end of the year.

He added that the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service was working with the Energy Ministry to advance a bill that would require large oil companies to sell on an exchange at least 10 percent of their supplies for the domestic market. The bill, which hasn't gained the Cabinet's approval yet, will hopefully become law in time to take effect next year, he said.

The shareholders of mobile operator MegaFon have approved splitting shares at a ratio of 1:100 at an extraordinary meeting, Interfax reported Tuesday.

One ordinary share with a par value of 10 rubles will be converted into 100 ordinary shares with a par value of 0.10 rubles. As a result, the number of MegaFon shares will increase from 6.2 million issued shares to 620 million shares.

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