

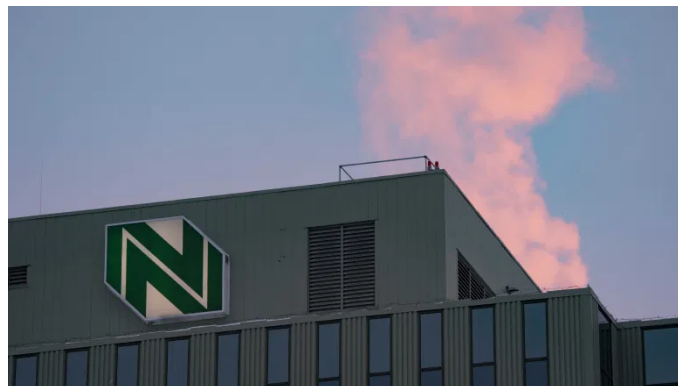


ECONOMY

CRTC grants interim approval for Northwestel's unlimited plans

Ollie Williams - November 24, 2020

Telecoms regulator the CRTC on Tuesday allowed Northwestel to begin rolling out unlimited internet packages across the North.



The Northwestel building in downtown Yellowknife on November 20, 2020. Sarah Pruys/Cabin Radio

Unlimited plans were originally to be launched at the start of November, but Northwestel said the CRTC needed more time to study its proposals. The regulator must approve any changes Northwestel makes to its packages because of the company's dominant position in the territories.

Smaller rival SSI Micro had filed an intervention asking the CRTC not to approve Northwestel's plans, calling them "anti-competitive."

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Tuesday's decision provides interim approval for Northwestel's plans, meaning the CRTC will still go through a more detailed examination of their impact but will let Northwestel go ahead on a provisional basis.

SSI had requested Northwestel file a cost study before the regulator granted interim approval. The CRTC said such a study had been received from Northwestel on November 13.

"The commission considers it appropriate to approve the application on an interim basis prior to reviewing the

whole record,” the CRTC stated, “in order to address customers’ increased internet data needs and alleviate their increased internet usage costs in the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic.”

The CRTC’s final ruling will follow at a later, unspecified date. (Rarely, though, has the regulator granted interim approval only to walk it back later.)

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Interim approval comes into effect on December 1.

It’s not clear when Northwestel will now begin rolling out unlimited plans. The company has been approached for comment.

Unlimited plans are set to be offered first in Yellowknife, Fort Smith, Norman Wells, and Hay River, alongside several Yukon and BC communities.

Not all residents in and around those communities may benefit, though, depending on whether the infrastructure to all homes has been updated.

SSI wants 'healthy competition'

SSI Micro's intervention stems from the need for Northwestel's smaller competitors to buy access to Northwestel's own fibre line so they can provide competing services.

SSI alleges Northwestel isn't being fair to its wholesale customers. As Northwestel is [receiving federal funding](#) to roll out unlimited plans, SSI contends it should have access to Northwestel's infrastructure that allows competitive pricing.

Dean Proctor, SSI's chief development officer, earlier [told Moose FM](#) Northwestel's bid to introduce unlimited plans was "a naked grab on their part to run competition out of the market."

"We're trying to give proper competition to make sure that competition is maintained in the North, but to make sure that competition is actually healthy competition," Proctor told the broadcaster.

Northwestel has not publicly addressed SSI's concerns, but has in the past said it believes its rates to be "balanced and reasonable."