

# Going ahead

**David Hartshorn**, Secretary General of the GVF, reports on the latest satellite industry initiative launched to assure earth station integrity.



*David Hartshorn, Secretary General of the GVF*

The satellite industry has launched a campaign to ensure that high standards of earth station quality are maintained in Asia, as well as throughout every other major region of the world. The initiative, which has been coordinated through GVF, the international association of the satellite sector, recognises that a turning point has been reached with regard to maintaining practices that ensure integrity of services for Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT) customers. As the technology has matured, there has been a tendency to 'take for granted' many of the safeguards that had been established.

"Our overall objective is to address concerns regarding the pull-back by some of the major players in the industry from supporting the type approval process," said Colin Robinson, Chair of the GVF Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) Working Group. Robinson, who is Tripoint Global's Senior Director, Program Management, added that: "The pendulum swings between limits. In the early days when the focus was directed towards C-band services, there were numerous reports of interference which were believed to be linked to lower equipment performance standards. The move to Ku-band corrected the majority of these deficiencies and the industry has enjoyed a prolonged period of reliable satellite communications. Financial forces, and perhaps a degree of complacency, are now driving some to relax the requirements for type approved equipment."

The GVF-MRA - comprising a broad spectrum of satellite operators, equipment manufacturers and system integrators - is addressing these concerns by working with the satellite operator community to establish more unified standards and maintain the type approval procedures that have been a major contributor to the industry's success.

With a de-emphasis on the need

for type approvals, the group has resolved that there is a growing tendency to address interference problems on a case-by-case basis, only after they have occurred rather than to maintain the safeguards that prevent their occurrence in the first place. The motivation for this strategy is driven by short-term economic pressures to reduce costs. However, a relaxation or abandonment of these safeguards will actually add costs to the industry, as poor-quality systems are introduced in the global satellite communications marketplace.

Indeed, it was reported by the industry group that numerous manufacturers with little or no experience in producing earth station systems have been approaching satellite operators seeking type approvals. In the absence of a competent verification and testing regime, these new market entrants - many of which are based in developing countries where alternate technical resources do not exist - simply begin selling their systems to the user community, regardless of poor quality.

The group noted that it is in the industry's best interest not to return to the practices in place prior to the advent of Ku-band VSAT services. Rampant interference to the C-band services of the day was a primary driver in the migration to Ku-band.

Further, the satellite system operators and service providers clearly have a need to protect their space-segment investment. If increasing interference levels drive customers to competing technologies such as fibre and other terrestrial alternatives this could prove to be economically devastating to the satellite industry.

With major satellite operators relaxing the requirement to demonstrate the performance of ground segment equipment prior to the activation of their services, conditions have been set in place for a return to the interference levels experi-

enced by the early C-band operators.

The GVF-MRA is in a unique position to address the challenge because it is represented by a total cross section of the VSAT industry from the satellite system operators and service providers to the manufacturing sector and finally to the customers. All of these sectors have much to lose if the reliability and quality of service is allowed to degrade. It was against this background that the membership worked together to identify a short term and longer term list of objectives designed to protect the integrity of services and maintain the high standards previously established by the VSAT industry. These included:

- VSAT Approvals: Continued type-approval requests from earth station manufacturers can be accommodated by the existing network of GVF Authorised Test Entities established to support the MRA type approvals process;
- VSAT Installation Training: To address poor installations that are creating "serious problems" for satellite operators, the GVF *VSAT Installation & Maintenance Training Program* has been established to promote higher levels of competency in earth station deployment;
- Harmonisation: It was agreed that the MRA would work with the satellite operator community to explore the feasibility of developing a universal EIRP mask to facilitate the development of antenna and equipment specifications; and
- The above establishes a plan of linked and supporting activities which will serve the satellite operator and equipment manufacturing communities. A primary objective for this plan is to maintain the high standards and quality of services enjoyed by the industry. ■