

## ERGO

*Analysing developments impacting business*

### DOT PAVES WAY FOR IN-FLIGHT WI-FI

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The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) has amended the Flight and Maritime Connectivity Rules, 2018 (Rules), through the Flight and Maritime Connectivity (Amendment) Rules, 2024 (Amendment), which was published in the Official Gazette on 28 October 2024. The Amendment primarily provides clarity on the usage of internet services through Wi-Fi in the domestic aircrafts.

#### **Background**

In line with Telecom Regulatory Authority of India's (TRAI) recommendations pertaining to In-Flight Connectivity (IFC) issued on 18 January 2018 (IFC Recommendations), DoT had introduced the Rules in 2018. The Rules allow passengers to use mobile phones and internet services on aircraft and ships operating within Indian territory. These regulations for the first time paved way for in flight mobile and Wi-Fi services in Indian air space while also setting out technical standards for onboard communication, establishing licensing processes for interested applicants, and further defining security measures to be followed by the licensed Inflight and Maritime Connectivity Service Providers (IFMC) to ensure regulated connectivity in the aircrafts and ships.

Even though the Rules permitted IFC in 2018, IFC services have not 'taken-off' in the intended manner. Considering the growing popularity and demand for in-flight Wi-Fi services in recent times, DoT has issued the Amendment to provide clarity on the usage of Wi-Fi services in the aircrafts.

#### **Key Highlights of the Amendment**

- a) **Clarity on access of internet services through Wi-Fi:** Under the Rules, the Government had mandated that IFMC providers to offer mobile communication services at a minimum altitude of 3,000 meters within Indian airspace. This was mainly to prevent interference with terrestrial networks. However, for internet services through Wi-fi, the minimum altitude requirement for providing Wi-Fi internet services was not explicitly stated. While the Rules specified that internet services could only be provided when electronic devices were in airplane mode, it did not directly tie (or de-link) internet access to a minimum altitude. By virtue of the Amendment, DoT has now clarified that IFMC providers can offer in-flight Wi-Fi as soon as passengers are allowed to use their electronic devices on the aircraft (e.g., after take-off and before landing of the aircraft), effectively removing the altitude restriction of 3,000 meters that is applicable in the case of mobile communication services.

- b) **Alignment with TRAI's IFC Recommendations:** According to the IFC Recommendations, mobile communication systems on aircraft should operate at a minimum altitude of 3,000 meters above ground level to prevent interference with ground-based mobile networks. However, the recommendations also emphasized that there is no such concern regarding the use of onboard internet services. This suggests that the altitude requirement should not apply to in-flight Wi-Fi connectivity, reinforcing the decision to de-link Wi-Fi access from altitude restrictions.

## Comments

Over the years, there has been a growing demand for seamless internet connectivity among passengers, even during the flight. With more people using their devices onboard for work, entertainment and communication, passengers expect to remain connected from 'gate to gate'. Allowing internet services while electronic devices are in use is a welcome move by DoT and rightly aligns with the global trend and enhances the passenger experience. That said, it will have to be seen how this service is rolled out by domestic airlines particularly given this initiative will require significant investments in satellite or ground-based technology and at the same time require airlines to keep the service affordable to attract more customers. It will have to be seen if DoT comes out with supplemental measures like terms and conditions for users of internet services onboard and additional compliances for service providers to keep security concerns at bay.

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