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LIQUID Telecommunications, a subsidiary of the Econet Wireless Group, has acquired one of the country's leading Internet Service Providers (ISP), Zimbabwe Online (ZOL), in a deal that makes Liquid Zimbabwe's largest data company. ZOL is now part of Liquid Telecom, formerly known as Ecoweb.

ZOL, which offers fibre, VSAT and wireless services, would remain an independent company in terms of branding and operations, sources said.

In 2009, Econet began a US\$66 million project to build an extensive fibre project, in partnership with China's Huawei Technologies.

Last year, Econet announced it had signed a US\$70 million partnership agreement with Liquid, under which Liquid would take a 49% stake in the cellular operator's ISP arm, Ecoweb, and also assume management control.

Econet said at the time the deal would bolster Ecoweb's market positioning and aid the group's aims of providing universal access to telecoms services.

Liquid Telecom has an extensive fibre network covering much of Sadc, spanning Lesotho, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia and the DRC.

Liquid Telecom also operates satellite internet facilities in the United Kingdom, Botswana, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Somalia, Burundi, Niger and Kenya. The new acquisition will position Liquid as Zimbabwe largest internet company in terms of infrastructure, volume of traffic and customer base.

Analysts say this is part of Econet's wider plan to get a lion's share in the data business. This comes after Econet spent heavily on infrastructure such as fibre optic around the country.

The mobile phone operator launched Econet Broadband in 2010 and reportedly has 1,8 million users. Although businessdigest's queries had not been responded to at the time of going to press, sources said management at ZOL briefed staff at the company of the development on Monday.

ZOL CEO David Behr was said to be in meetings and had not responded to businessdigest's enquiries at the time of going to press. Econet had also not responded at the time of going to press.