

## Here We Go Again

Six months ago, we took the ARRL to task in these pages for the secretive way in which it modified and then withdrew its controversial FCC petition proposing HF subbands based on bandwidth rather than mode (“The Secret Society,” June 2007). Now, it appears to be doing an end-run around not only its members but the FCC as well. As Ronald Reagan once famously said, “Here we go again.”

To briefly review where we’ve been so far on this issue, back in 2002, the ARRL Board of Directors decided that, in order to best keep pace with developing technology, it would propose that the FCC change the way it divides up the amateur bands from the current mode basis (e.g., CW, phone, data, image) to one based on signal bandwidth (e.g., 200 Hz, 500 Hz, 3000 Hz, 6000 Hz). This, the League reasoned, would encourage the development of new modes without needing specific FCC approval for each one, and would eliminate confusion over some of the existing newer modes, such as digital voice (is it voice or is it data?). The thinking was that not much would change in actual usage—CW and narrow-bandwidth digital modes would continue to predominate in the 200 and 500 Hz segments, while SSB would continue to be the primary mode in the 3000 Hz areas (and the divisions would match up with the current dividing lines between the CW and phone subbands). The concept became known as “regulation by bandwidth.”

Before drafting its proposal, the ARRL wisely set out on a program of explaining the concept to anyone willing to listen and soliciting input from its members and the ham community at large. It stretched over three years. Finally, in late 2005, the League submitted a “regulation by bandwidth” petition to the FCC. Criticism was instantaneous and intense, and not always rooted in fact. Various subgroups within the hobby felt the ARRL was trying to promote one mode or activity at the expense of others (particularly theirs), and that this would be the end of amateur radio as we know it. CQ filed comments generally supporting the concept of regulation by bandwidth (we still do), but objecting to some of the specifics within the ARRL proposal. Others expressed their own views.

In early 2007, realizing that the tide of amateur opinion was not yet attuned to the need to make changes, ARRL officials met quietly with FCC officials and submitted revisions that essentially gutted the proposal, then a couple of months later, withdrew the petition altogether. At the time, the League said it still felt that a shift to regulation by bandwidth was necessary and that it would revisit the issue in the future. It appears to be revisiting it now, and appears to be continuing the pattern started earlier this year of doing so very quietly and with very little explanation.

The vehicle this time is Region II of the International Amateur Radio Union (IARU), which, on paper, is the international organization representing all national amateur radio societies before the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and other international agencies. The ARRL, however, has always served as the IARU’s international secretariat; former ARRL officers have always served as IARU President (currently, it’s former ARRL President Larry Price, W4RA), and particularly here in Region II (North and South America), the ARRL has always had a tremendous amount of influence over IARU policy.

In mid-October, IARU Region II quietly announced that it had adopted a new HF band plan, “as the way to better organize the use of our bands efficiently.” The brief introduction urged member societies “in coordination with the authorities, (to) incorporate it in their regulations an promote it widely with their radio amateur communities.”

The new band plan takes effect January 1, 2008, and guess what? It’s broken down by bandwidths! Not only

that, but it appears to do nearly everything that opponents of the original ARRL plan feared that *it* would do. It limits AM operation to two 25-kHz segments in the 75-meter band and frequencies above 29 MHz, does not provide at all for other wider-than-SSB voice modes such as independent sideband (ISB) or enhanced single sideband (ESSB), and establishes segments for automatically controlled wide-bandwidth (2700 Hz) digital stations on all HF bands except 160 and 30 meters. In several cases, these “robot” station segments are right at the bottom of the U.S. phone bands, where the best DX can often be found. Currently, data transmission is not permitted in most U.S. HF phone bands.

Now there are several important things to note:

1) This band plan is voluntary and is superseded by regulations in specific countries. For example, it will not change the FCC rules that limit automatically controlled digital stations to nine very small band segments. However, growth of activity on those frequencies in other countries will no doubt lead to pressure on the FCC to bring US subbands into compliance.

2) There is currently no bandwidth limitation on automatic digital stations operating within those band segments, and current FCC rules permit semi-automatic digital stations anywhere that RTTY is allowed (generally the CW subbands), but subject to a 500-Hz bandwidth limit outside the specific segments.

3) The band plan states that IARU member societies are urged to limit the number of unattended stations on the air, and that they all should be semi-automatic, that is, coming on the air only in response to a query from a station under operator control. But in specifically creating segments for them on virtually all HF ham bands, the plan appears to encourage rather than discourage this type of operation.

4) The ARRL’s original petition to the FCC called for the bandwidth on the current phone bands to be 3.5 kHz; its revised plan dropped that (without explanation) to 3 kHz; and now the maximum bandwidth for SSB in the IARU band plan is 2.7 kHz. It’s the incredible shrinking sideband signal...

5) As in the past, we at CQ agree philosophically with the need for regulation by bandwidth, and we support strong band planning. We even urged the FCC in our comments on this original proceeding to put band planning on a par with repeater coordination, keeping it voluntary but giving precedence to those complying with it in the event of interference. But decisions of this magnitude should not be made in private, without public discussion and debate.

6) There are many excellent features to this band plan, including the establishment of “centres of activity” on each band for slow-speed Morse code, QRP (low-power), slow-scan TV, digital voice and emergency communications, along with “preferred” contesting areas.

It is unfortunate that all of these excellent components will doubtless be overshadowed by the ARRL’s apparent insistence on implementing regulation by bandwidth—including significant areas for unattended wideband digital stations—even though it is obvious that its members and other U.S. amateurs are not ready for it. It is equally unfortunate that there was no opportunity for the general ham public to discuss or debate any of this before the new plan was adopted. The nameplate on the door may say IARU, but the door itself is in Newington, and change comes very slowly in Newington. The secret society is alive and well.

On a more pleasant note, happy holidays and happy new year to all!

73, Rich W2VU

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(Note: Due to space constraints, the “Radio Classics” column by Joe Veras, K9OCO, will appear next month.)