



It Seems to Us

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WRC-15

“It wasn’t easy, but Amateur Radio has gained its first all-new HF allocation in more than a generation.”

As these words are being composed, the 2015 World Radiocommunication Conference (WRC) in Geneva is in the third of its scheduled four weeks. The week began on a somber note with an Extraordinary Plenary on Monday to remember the victims of the previous Friday’s terrorist attacks in Paris, just 300 miles away, and the other recent terrorist incidents that have claimed so many innocent lives. Once work resumed, by lunchtime a new global secondary allocation for the amateur service at 5351.5 – 5366.5 kHz had been approved at committee level. It received final approval on Wednesday, November 18.

The allocation is not as wide as we had hoped and comes with power restrictions that we would have preferred to avoid. Still, it is the first all-new amateur allocation in the HF bands (between 3 and 30 MHz) since 1979 and is our most significant step forward since the 2003 WRC moved broadcasters out of 7100 – 7200 kHz.

Since the 1990s some administrations, including the United States, have permitted operation in this frequency range on a restricted basis, mostly on spot frequencies and with other limitations, either as amateur or as experimental stations. These arrangements have been useful and are appreciated, but an international allocation has eluded us — until now.

The history of what we call the 60 meter band begins in 1990, when the Administrative Council of the International Amateur Radio Union (IARU) defined a spectrum requirement in the vicinity of 5 MHz to bridge the propagation gap between the 3.5 and 7 MHz bands. Much of that history was recounted on this page in the July 2003, July 2010, and December 2014 issues of *QST*, which are available to members on the ARRL website.

WRCs are held every 3 or 4 years by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a specialized agency of the United Nations. Each WRC reviews and revises selected portions of the international Radio Regulations and develops an agenda for the next one. WRC-12 agreed to a proposal by Cuba for a WRC-15 agenda item to consider a possible secondary allocation to the amateur service somewhere between 5250 and 5450 kHz.

Getting an item on a conference agenda is not easy. Each agenda item requires a commitment of scarce resources by the ITU and its Member States. Preparations for a WRC begin literally on the day after the previous one and involve detailed technical studies and countless meetings at the national, regional, and international levels. The objective is for delegates from administrations to reach consensus at the WRC on the best way to resolve each agenda item. Sometimes “no change,” or “NOC” in ITU-speak, is all that can be agreed upon. That came close to being the outcome on 60 meters.

There are 193 Member States in the ITU. It would be impossible for so many parties to reach consensus on a long list of agenda items in a 4-week conference, so a lot of preparatory work is done within six regional telecommunications organizations (RTOs) that encompass

most of these countries. The idea is that if groups of neighbors can agree in advance on common approaches, resolving differences will be easier at the WRC itself.

In the case of a 5 MHz amateur allocation, the WRC began with RTOs and major administrations taking a wide range of disparate positions. At one end of the range was CITEL, the RTO for the Americas, with an Inter-American Proposal (IAP) supported by about a dozen countries for a secondary allocation of 175 kHz. Unfortunately, this was more spectrum than either the United States or Canada could accept; they did not join the IAP. Canada offered a proposal for two segments totaling 50 kHz but was all alone in doing so; the US came to the conference advocating NOC.

Another generous regional proposal came from CEPT, the RTO for Europe, for a 100 kHz allocation that ultimately was supported by 29 administrations. However, several major countries — Germany, France, and the United Kingdom among them — did not sign on.

An impressive number of African administrations supported an amateur allocation without initially offering specifics. The Arab Spectrum Management Group offered a common proposal supported by 10 countries for an allocation of up to 15 kHz and with an unspecified power limit to protect the primary services (fixed and mobile). China proposed a 15 kHz allocation with a power limit that was slightly more generous than what was ultimately adopted, although the Asia-Pacific Telecommunity could not agree on a common proposal. Russia and its RTO strongly supported NOC.

The first week of WRC-15 saw rancorous debate in Sub Working Group 4B1 between the proponents and opponents of an amateur allocation. By the end of the week it was apparent that a 15 kHz allocation with a power limit in the vicinity of 15 W EIRP (effective isotropic radiated power) was all that could be achieved, and that is indeed how it ultimately turned out. Once the exact limits of the allocation had been agreed, early in the second week, the US came off its NOC position and advocated a more realistic power limit, but to no avail.

The difficulty of achieving what we did can be gauged by the fact that it took a very hard fight by CITEL to gain an extra 2.2 dB for amateurs in South America and the Caribbean. Russia and its RTO opposed the inclusion of Mexico in this arrangement but ultimately agreed to a figure for Mexico that is less than 1 dB lower than for its neighbors to the south and east.

Was it worth it? That will depend on what administrations, including our own, decide to do from this point forward. Rest assured that ARRL will argue for a combination of the best features of the existing domestic arrangement and the new international allocation.