

More Than Ever

At a meeting of my town's Local Emergency Planning Council in late November, our outgoing emergency management director—an about-to-retire police captain—pulled me aside. Technically, I'm the town's RACES1 Coordinator, but in truth, there hasn't been much to coordinate recently, a fate that has also befallen our town's near-dormant CERT2 organization. The two of us had been planning to meet in the fall to discuss how we could make ham radio a more active part of the town's emergency response program, but we never managed to get together. Now, he was encouraging me to schedule a meeting with his successor as soon as he got settled in.

"We're going to be needing you guys more than ever," he said, noting that at the town's 911 dispatch center, "we don't even have real phones anymore. You click a mouse on a screen," he explained, to make or answer a call, adding, "the more complex this stuff gets, the more likely it is to fail."

When that happens—as emergency responders in the Pacific Northwest were reminded just a week or so later (see this issue's "Public Service" column)—they need to rely on good old analog radio to get critical messages through. More often than not, nowadays, there are hams behind the microphones or keyboards connected to those good old analog radios because most government agencies get rid of their "obsolete" analog gear when they "upgrade" to "modern" digital systems. Yet, as Dr. Eric Haseltine, AB3DI, former Associate Director of National Intelligence for Science and Technology, succinctly put it in a recent CQ interview (to be featured in an upcoming issue), "... when you get right down to it, everything is analog." Even when you're putting digital signals onto a radio wave, the radio wave itself is still analog and always will be.

Yet, there is a big push in some segments of the amateur radio emergency communications community to put more of our "eggs" in the digital "basket," with increasing use of digital or hybrid systems, such as Winlink or Echolink. There is nothing wrong with this as long as they become additional tools we can use in emergencies and do not replace or supplant good old analog radio. Curiously, much of this push comes from served agencies that want to make our radio systems more like the systems that their people are familiar with using every day ... the very systems we'd be filling in for because they have failed.

This desire to be able to provide served agencies with "plug-and-play" replacement systems is also one of the driving forces behind efforts to open up more space on the HF ham bands for automatically controlled data networks such as Winlink. And it is this effort that underlies some of the strongest objections to the now-withdrawn ARRL petition to the FCC for "regulation by bandwidth" as well as the new HF band plan announced recently by Region 2 of the International Amateur Radio Union (IARU), covering North and South America, which was the topic of our editorial last month. The feedback to that editorial has been very interesting, by the way. First of all, virtually all of the comments we've received have been positive. In fact, the only two people I heard from who were critical of the editorial were ARRL President Joel Harrison, W5ZN, and IARU Vice President Tim Ellam, VE6SH. Their letters are too long to reprint here in full (and W5ZN released much of what he wrote as a public statement), but we will provide a summary of their major points, as well as our responses.

The main point made by both Joel and Tim was that the Region 2 bandplan was not an ARRL initiative and was

*e-mail: <w2vu@cq-amateur-radio.com>

based on the Region 1 bandplan adopted for Europe, Africa, and the Middle East in 2005, and which itself was the basis for the ARRL's ill-fated FCC proposal. Any similarity between the League's FCC proposal and the Region 2 bandplan, they say, reflects their common source document. Harrison emphasized that the Region 2 bandplan "is not a vehicle for achieving what has not yet been achieved through FCC rulemaking," and added that "the ARRL will not be pursuing rulemaking until some degree of consensus can be achieved in the amateur community." We're happy to hear that.

Their other major point was that the IARU is an independent organization that is not controlled by the ARRL or any other member society, although Harrison freely admits that the ARRL is "the largest and indeed, the most influential amateur radio organization in the world." Ellam says that "To suggest that the ARRL always has had a 'tremendous amount of influence' over IARU policy is misleading as it ignores the fact that all member societies have an equal vote under the present constitution." He also notes that the IARU was founded in Paris in 1925 and that "(w)hile the ARRL is presently the IARU's international secretariat, it only holds that position by agreement with the member societies." What he omits is that the Paris meeting was organized by then ARRL President Hiram Percy Maxim, who became the first president of IARU, and that the secretariat agreement has been in place since 1925.

Further, Ellam challenges our assertion that "former ARRL officers have always served as IARU President," noting that while current president W4RA is indeed a former League president, "the last former ARRL president to hold the position of IARU president was the late Bob Denniston, WØDX (who served as IARU President) from 1966 to 1974, over 30 years ago." Tim is correct, to an extent. WØDX was succeeded as IARU President by Noel Eaton, VE3CJ, the organization's first non-US president. However, through most of his eight-year term, Eaton served concurrently as ARRL International Affairs Vice President. VE3CJ was succeeded as IARU President in 1982 by Dick Baldwin, W1RU, who had just retired as ARRL General Manager and who had served as IARU Secretary from 1976 to 1982. Baldwin held the IARU's top post for the next 17 years and was succeeded in 1999 by current IARU President (and former ARRL President) Larry Price, W4RA. We will let these facts speak for themselves.

As to the question of which plan for regulation by bandwidth is chicken or egg, that really is less important than the fact that the ARRL—knowing there was no consensus for the concept among its members—decided to vote yes rather than seeking additional time to try to build a consensus before taking final action.

Some writers called for a new organization to replace the ARRL as the representative of U.S. hams. We don't need that. What we do need is an ARRL that is responsive and responsible to its members and that is honest and open in its decision-making. League President W5ZN said in a follow-up letter to us that he has "no quarrel with (CQ's) desire for transparency in the ARRL's decision-making." We applaud that and look forward seeing it become a reality in the future as it has often been in the past. Because, with all of the threats to the future of our service, both current and over the horizon, "we're going to be needing you guys"—both ARRL and IARU—"more than ever."

— — — —

Notes

1. Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service
2. Community Emergency Response Team