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Band Planning

"The January 2015 Board Meeting marked another step in the process of updating the ARRL HF band plans."

Amateur Radio functions within a framework of international regulations, national laws and regulations, and voluntary standards of good operating practice. As licensees we are obliged to adhere to the regulations of the telecommunications administration that issued the license. In the United States and its territories that is, of course, the Federal Communications Commission; other countries have their own equivalents.

The FCC regulations that govern Amateur Radio are much more detailed than those of most other administrations. Take, for example, the division of the HF bands by mode. With the exception of 60 and 30 meters (160 meters being an MF band) there is in each band an FCC-mandated boundary between the phone/image subband and the RTTY/data subband (the latter generally being referred to as the "CW band" even though CW is permitted in both subbands). In recognition of long-standing amateur practice, the FCC even calls the two subbands of the 3500 – 4000 kHz band by different names: 75 meters for phone/image and 80 meters for RTTY/data.

There are no such divisions in, for example, the Canadian regulations. There is simply a bandwidth limit of 6 kHz in most HF bands, 1 kHz on 30 meters, and 20 kHz on 10 meters. The German regulations are similar with bandwidth limits of 2.7 kHz in most bands, 800 Hz on 30 meters, and 7 kHz on 10 meters. In these two countries, and in most of the rest of the world, there are no subbands established by rule. The administrations leave it to the amateur community to work out how to make the most effective use of the amateur allocations. The mechanism for doing so is called "band planning," and is conducted at both domestic and international levels.

Within the International Amateur Radio Union (IARU), there are three regional organizations corresponding to the Regions that the International Telecommunication Union uses for radio frequency allocation purposes. Each IARU regional organization holds a conference every 3 years at which representatives of IARU member-societies gather to discuss, among other things, regional band plans. Observance of the band plans is voluntary, except in a few countries where the regional IARU band plan is incorporated by reference in the domestic regulations. The regional band planning process is taken quite seriously nonetheless, particularly by the European member-societies. In recent years, there has been a conscious effort to align the regional band plans as much as possible.

Here in the United States we are required to observe the FCC regulations, which dictate somewhat different frequency use than is suggested by the voluntary Region 2 band plans. As most readers of this page know all too well, amending the FCC rules is a very time-consuming and tortuous process. The 3-year cycle of regional band planning may look almost speedy by comparison. Band planning tends to lag changes in operating patterns brought about by the adoption of new technologies, but because the band plans are not mandatory, they are not barriers to progress.

At IARU conferences, the ARRL representatives do not attempt to persuade our colleagues from other countries to bring the regional band plans into perfect alignment with the FCC rules. Such an effort would be both futile and counterproductive. Our domestic band plans therefore depart somewhat from the regional plans, because they must take the constraints of the FCC rules into account.

At its January 2014 meeting, the ARRL Board of Directors acknowledged the concerns of members with regard to the increasing popularity of data modes and asked its HF Band Planning Committee to solicit input as to how the various modes, including CW and RTTY, could better coexist in the RTTY/data subbands. Hundreds of members took the opportunity to share their thoughts. In July the committee reported to the Board that, based on this input, it was preparing "strawman" proposals for updates to the band plans for further membership consideration.

A recurring theme in the comments received was that the FCC had made a mistake in 2006 when it shifted the boundary between the 80 and 75 meter bands from 3750 kHz all the way down to 3600 kHz. On this page in the December 2006 issue of *QST,* we questioned the wisdom of this move, which compressed 250 kHz of CW/RTTY/data activity into just 100 kHz at a time when RTTY/data activity was expanding. A number of commenters said that a readjustment was needed if there was to be any improvement in coexistence among CW/RTTY/data operators on 80 meters. Therefore, the committee advised the Board that it recommended the restoration of 3600 – 3650 kHz for RTTY/data operation, which would require FCC rulemaking.

The HF Band Planning Committee submitted a further report to the Board at its January 2015 meeting that outlines its strawman proposals. The committee concluded that apart from the 80 meter issue, most of the concerns voiced by members can be addressed by modest adjustments to the existing band plans, and mainly by confining data modes with bandwidths greater than 500 Hz to the FCC-designated segments for automatically controlled digital stations and to parts of the RTTY/data subbands above those segments. The committee report has more detail and will be available at **www.arrl.org/committee-reports** by the time this issue of *QST* reaches members. The Board is also asking for membership comment on the possibility of adding RTTY and data privileges for Technician and Novice licensees in their existing 15 meter CW subband.

The strawman proposals will be made available in graph form as soon as possible. Member comment is welcomed and encouraged; nothing is set in stone, either with regard to the voluntary band plans or to a possible FCC petition. Take a look and let us know what you think.