FCC Eliminates Morse Co1de as Exam Requirement!

From ARRL News

Early in 2007, the US will join the growing list of countries that no longer require Amateur Radio applicants to pass a Morse code test as the entry ticket to HF. Announcement of the pending historic rule change arrived with no fanfare December 15 in an FCC public notice. A full-blown Report and Order (R&O) in the proceeding, WT Docket 05-235, followed December 19. The best estimate of when the Morse code requirement will go away officially is sometime in February -- 30 days after the R&O appears in the Federal Register.

"We . . . believe that the public interest is not served by requiring facility in Morse code when the trend in amateur communications is to use voice and digital technologies for exchanging messages," the FCC said in its R&O. "Rather, we believe that because the international requirement for telegraphy proficiency has been eliminated, we should treat Morse code telegraphy no differently from other Amateur Service communications techniques."

The FCC says it deems the current regime of written examinations "sufficient to determine whether a person is qualified to be issued an Amateur Radio operator license."

The FCC cast aside arguments that Morse ability is advantageous in emergencies, concluding that most emergency communication is handled using voice, data, or video techniques. The Commission also turned away assertions that retaining a Morse requirement would help keep out the bad apples.

"The record is devoid of a demonstrated nexus between Morse code proficiency and on-the-air conduct," the FCC observed. It concurred with one commenter's observation that "maintaining the code requirement does not purge Amateur Radio of bad operators. Education and self-policing does."

The FCC also ordered that all Technician licensees present and future -- whether or not they've passed a Morse code test, will get privileges on 80, 40, 15 and 10 meters identical to those of Novice licensees. "In eliminating this disparity between Technician and Technician Plus licenses, we are simplifying the Amateur Service licensing structure and promoting regulatory parity," the FCC said.

The FCC took advantage of the occasion to act on the League's Petition for Partial Reconsideration in the "omnibus" proceeding, WT Docket 04-140, calling on the Commission to retain 3620 to 3635 kHz for automatically controlled digital stations by moving the Extra class phone band edge to 3635 kHz. The FCC decided instead to authorize 3585 to 3600 kHz for such operations, and leave the newly expanded phone band intact.

The Commission further amended Part 97 "to authorize Amateur Extra class privileges to all individuals who have been issued a CEPT radio-amateur license by their country of citizenship, and who satisfy other requirements in the Commission's rules."

Although the FCC's Morse code decision came as no surprise, it nonetheless revived debate on the issue. The FCC had proposed more than a year ago to drop the Morse code requirement for all license classes. The record in the proceeding, the FCC said, "reflects a division of views in the Amateur Radio community." After reviewing the more than 3500 comments and counter-proposals radio amateurs had filed, the Commission stuck with its initial proposal.

ARRL President Joel Harrison, W5ZN, had this reaction: "While the Commission's decision to delete the Morse code requirement for an Amateur Extra Class license departs from the ARRL's recommendation, it is helpful to have the matter resolved so we can move forward."

ARRL CEO David Sumner, K1ZZ, expressed a similar viewpoint. "Now that the debate is over, we can focus on learning Morse code simply for its own sake," he said. Sumner pledged that the League would maintain its traditional support of Morse code as an operating mode and would continue to offer Morse training materials as well as such incentives as bonus credit for CW contacts in ARRL-sponsored operating events. ARRL's Hiram Percy Maxim Memorial Station W1AW will keep its schedule of Morse code practice and bulletin transmissions.

Since World Radiocommunication Conference 2003, the UK, Canada, Germany and other countries have dropped their Morse requirements. Sumner said other countries have successfully made the transition to a codeless testing regime, and he doesn't anticipate problems in the US.

The pending disappearance of the Morse code requirement seems to have rejuvenated the urge to upgrade. ARRL Sales and Marketing Manager Bob Inderbitzen, NQ1R, says sales of General Class license training materials have skyrocketed in the week after the FCC announcement.

The ARRL has posted information relevant to the FCC action in WT Docket 05-235, on its Web site: *http://www.arrl.org/fcc/morse/*

Lee Hickok W9MBX

We are sad to learn of the death of Lee Hickok, W9MBX on December 27. He was 81. He was the Chief Engineer of WLRW Radio for several years, then the City Electrician for Urbana for several more years until his retirement. He was a long time member of TCARC.

Commenting on the Morse Code Change

There are many comments on and off the air about the elimination of code testing. Tempers seem to flare and we hear personal attacks against those who have different opinions. We all have a right to express our opinions. Please respect this right and avoid personal remarks. Personal wars are detrimental to our hobby.

Kansas Balloon Rescue by KA9SZX

On Saturday, December 2, a group of students at the Kansas Wesleyan University Physics Club launched a high-altitude balloon with some help from the Salina Ham Radio Club. The balloon carried Ham Radio and GPS tracking equipment, similar to many Amateur Radio balloon flights around the country. It was expected to stay in the air about 3 hours. However, surface winds carried it higher and farther than expected. The launch team tracked the balloon into Missouri, following the path. After they lost the signal, an Amateur Radio Operator in Iowa tracked it into Illinois. It appeared that the balloon landed near Blandinsville, Illinois, which is near Macomb.

Amateur Radio Operators in Macomb heard about the landing and began to search for it. They alerted Mark Garrett, KA9SZX, about the landing. Mark, now the Assistant Director of Technology at Western Illinois University's Tri States Public Radio in Macomb, started searching for the downed balloon on Monday, December 4, after work. He coordinated with other Amateurs in the Macomb area, and on Tuesday they continued searching a smaller area. The balloon's batteries were nearing the end of their life at this point, so time was critical.

Mark located the balloon East of LaHarpe, about 2 miles north of Blandinsville, in an open farm field. It was about a quarter mile into the field. Mark was taking readings along the road when a person stopped and offered to take him into the field in a four-wheel drive vehicle. They quickly zeroed in on the balloon and retrieved it. The balloon package was in excellent condition, considering it was in the field for several days. The 9-volt battery had dropped to 5.63 volts, but the beacon transmitter was still running.

The balloon reached about 95,000 feet before descending. Mark estimated that the balloon got caught in a jet stream and traveled to Illinois at over 110 mph. The Macomb Journal carried a very nice story on this event.