



Second Century

Some Perspective on the Expanded Technician Proposal

“As most of you know, at their January meeting, the ARRL Board of Directors authorized the ARRL General Counsel to file a petition with the FCC seeking to expand privileges for Technician-class licensees on the 80-, 40-, and 15-meter bands.”

Since the filing of the petition in February, I’ve been following comments across a wide array of Amateur Radio forums, and I’ve seen a wide spectrum of opinions, both positive and negative. I thought I would use this space to try to provide some perspective to the discussion.

First, I would encourage everyone to read the entire proposal, which can be found on the ARRL website at www.arrl.org/TechnicianEnhancement. I have seen a number of reactions to the proposal in which it is clear that the commenter has not read the entire proposal. I support a healthy discourse, and dissent is healthy, but I believe both parties to any discussion should be informed and working with the same basic set of information.

The genesis of this proposal came about in July 2016 when the ARRL Board of Directors created an ad hoc committee to study the then-current exam requirements for the Technician-class license, with an eye toward aligning the exam with the appropriate privileges allowed by the license. There hadn’t been a comprehensive review of the operating privileges available to the entry-level license since the late 1970s, when the Novice-class license — the entry level at that time — was modified to allow access to a limited portion of the 10-meter band, which included the first HF phone privileges for Novices. Technologies are changing, and it is appropriate that operating privileges be reviewed periodically to keep up with these changes.

Toward that end, the ad hoc committee put out a public call for comment and gathered over 8,000 opinions from a broad cross-section of the ARRL membership. These responses helped guide their work. Another objective was to create a license class similar to the “foundation” license that is used in other countries, which includes an array of basic HF phone, CW, and digital privileges, in addition to the VHF/UHF privileges already available with the current Technician-class license. The goal is to give Technicians a glimpse of what is possible on HF, not provide full HF privileges. It’s no longer sufficient to tell someone, “HF is fun. Upgrade to General, trust me...” People need to experience the options for themselves, and then decide.

Some of the comments I’ve read have included references to the Novice license, with proposals to reinstitute a similar entry-level license. On the surface, this appears to be a reasonable idea, but we must remember that the FCC is not going to increase the number of license classes. By dropping the Novice

license many years ago the FCC, by default, made the Technician-class license the quasi-entry-level license. It wasn’t intended to be that way originally, but that’s what it has evolved into. ARRL’s proposal recognizes that, and attempts to give Technicians a reasonable level of privileges, in the hope of providing incentive for potential hams to get licensed; and in the hope that the privileges conferred with that license are enough of a reward for making the effort to get licensed, so these new hams retain their interest and seek to improve their knowledge base. Conversely, the entry-level amateur license should not provide operating privileges so substantial as to inhibit the incentive to upgrade and pursue more advanced self-training. After much careful consideration, ARRL feels that the proposed expanded privileges strike a reasonable balance.

I’ve also seen comments that ARRL is “dumbing down” the Technician license exam. This is simply not the case. ARRL is not proposing any changes to the Technician-class question pool, which is reviewed and updated every 4 years by the National Conference of Volunteer Examiner Coordinators’ (NCVEC) Question Pool Committee. The current pool already tests for the basic technical and operating information that would allow Technician-class licensees to safely and appropriately use the proposed additional spectrum.

The ARRL petition does propose adding digital privileges for Technician-class licensees in the 80-, 40-, and 15-meter bands, and 275 kHz of spectrum across these bands for HF phone privileges. This would allow Technicians the opportunity to develop and expand their understanding of HF propagation. In addition, a large number of public service nets operate on frequencies included in the proposal, which would allow Technician licensees to play a greater role in those activities, which our surveys indicate is one of the reasons people get their first Amateur Radio license.

Ham radio has always been about communication and community. The proposed expansion to Technician-class operating privileges would serve to enhance both. I encourage you to read the complete proposal, in light of the points presented here, and consider the possibilities. Then, if you feel it appropriate, make your opinion known to your Division Director.

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