



Second Century

Pay to Play

My first love when I got into amateur radio was to work all states. With the help of a Callbook and a roll of stamps, I mailed my paper QSLs to easily get contacts confirmed for my ARRL WAS award, almost without exception. Once I carried this passion onto the DX stage, the math changed. It wasn't so easy to get a card, and even though I loved getting bureau envelopes, it was painfully slow. To speed things up and follow my WAS success, I found the DX Stamp Service, where I could buy the stamps from DX countries and send a SASE for a quick return. It worked like a charm! Not only did I get the confirmations back fast, I also enjoyed the little DX stamp collection I was amassing.

Those days are long gone. As technology continues to permeate and change the face of ham radio, so too has it changed the QSLing game. ARRL's Logbook of The World® was designed 2 decades ago to electronically exchange batches of log entries to facilitate electronic confirmations, and today many stations use it in real time hoping to get near real-time confirmations to apply to their various ARRL awards like DXCC.

Sounds great! And it is great fun! Other online tools like Club Log have further ramped up the game — not only from checking for needed entities, but also adding real-time on-the-air checking of where current DX stations are operating so you can chase them! You can even watch on the screen as your call sign scrolls up after you've made your contact. One feature that Club Log, among others, has implemented is called OQRS: Online QSL Request System.

OQRS started off as a reasonable way to reimburse a DX station for their card, envelope, and postage, but it has turned into something ARRL members routinely complain to me about as a “cash grab.” The requested dollars have turned from reimbursement into another source of funding for a station, irrespective of whether the station is a DXpedition or a permanent one looking for money. Many participants like me don't even want a card! Just upload to LoTW! And this is the rub. LoTW costs a DXpedition or DX station nothing to upload. Why can't they just upload to LoTW? Because the game has now changed to what members call “Pay to Play.”

The rules of this game vary. Some DXpeditions charge only \$2 for an LoTW upload or \$5 for a paper confirmation. But after that, the numbers start going up — and going up substantially. I use OQRS extensively in chasing my DXCC Challenge Awards. In just the first 4 months of this year I spent more than \$200 alone on OQRS confirmations, not including donations to expeditions, so I get it! Expeditions are now charging as much as \$15 for confirmation. Certain DX stations

— permanent stations — have shifted to charging for QSLs even though they used to not charge. And if you work them again after your three or four contacts have been confirmed? That's another \$5 – \$10. And once you've paid, how long should you then have to wait? After all, you're paying to get the confirmation now! There are no rules. Some expeditions have used a complex set of rules for timing based on donation size, when the donation was received, how much you donated, etc. Again, I've heard a lot of feedback about this.

Some operators don't require any Pay to Play, but they'll make you wait months or a year for that coveted log upload.

ARRL is the caretaker of the Colvin Award, an award established by Lloyd Colvin, W6KG (SK). Each year ARRL uses the grant to help fund group projects, typically DXpeditions, that represent a significant achievement in the field of DX. One of the terms is that the expedition must upload their log to LoTW within 12 months. Given the speed at which the world moves today, that 12 months is probably unreasonable and we should look to reduce it. Substantially.

What do you think? Is Pay to Play okay by you, as it mostly is for me? Like the DX Code of Conduct, should there be an OQRS Code of Conduct? If you feel strongly about it, be radio active by joining a local or national DX club, and let them know! Be a connector and help your club members with LoTW and OQRS to pursue their WAS and DXCC! And make plans to come to our National Convention hosted by the Huntsville Hamfest this year where we can talk about it in person!

David A. Minster, NA2AA
Chief Executive Officer