



By Gerry Oberst

Efficient Use of Satellite Slots

The Radiocommunication Bureau (BR) of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) apparently is following a new “get tough” approach with member states that do not follow the rules on putting communications satellites into use on time. The BR issued a letter May 1 to all member states (Circular Letter CR 301) respectfully urging them to review their use of satellite networks recorded in the ITU’s Master International Frequency Register (MIFR). Satellites that remain in the MIFR but not in operation can block the ability of other countries to coordinate and register their own satellites, and the BR wants the fictitious facilities cleared out of the records.

Thus, in parallel with this request for ITU members to follow the rules in good faith, the BR also said that going forward, it will enforce the rules itself and seek removal of unused frequency assignments from the MIFR.

Until recently, this approach would have been an idle threat. The BR and the body to which it reports on such matters, the Radio Regulation Board, often bent over backward to accept at face value what administrations told them. This approach got tricky, for example, when one South American country claimed to have brought into use frequencies on a satellite that was technically incapable of providing the claimed coverage and which external monitoring studies showed had not been turned on.

Will the BR follow up on its new policy? Already it has taken focused steps consistent with enforcing the international rules.

In March, the BR informed the Radio Regulation Board that it had initiated procedures to cancel a Vietnamese satellite filing at 107 degrees East. As a result of correspondence with that country and information publicly available, the BR concluded there was no satellite there and none had been brought into use. The Radio Regulation Board endorsed the BR’s decision to move forward with suppressing the satellite from the MIFR.

Following this action at the Radio Regulation Board’s March meeting, the BR has lined up the cancellation of four Eutelsat satellite registrations. A few days before it released

its CR 301 letter, the BR submitted two documents to be considered at the meeting, scheduled for July 6-10. The BR proposed to cancel registrations filed by France for Eutelsat covering satellites (that appear not to exist) at orbital slots of 44, 48 and 76 degrees East.

This BR action was prompted by claims from two other countries, Malaysia and Belarus, that there has been no Eutelsat satellites at those orbital locations for four or five years. A country can suspend operation of a satellite for up to two years and keep the MIFR entry alive, but not indefinitely.

After the BR wrote to France asking for clarification but got no response, the BR informed the administration that it would cancel the allegedly long-vacant assignments. The very next day, France responded with an effort to suspend all these filings and gain another two years of MIFR protection, angling to keep rights to the orbital positions until 2011.

We have seen only one side of this story, based on the BR’s submission to the Radio Regulation Board, and the matter remains pending for the Radio Regulation Board’s July meeting. Accepting an effort to rely on the suspension rules to maintain empty orbital slots in the MIFR, however, could strain the ITU rules well past the breaking point. A suspension notice is in principle due when a satellite has stopped operation for whatever reason.

The BR’s new “activism” was praised at a workshop it organized in Geneva on May 7. The event focused on efficient use of frequency and orbit resources, and several speakers referred to the Circular Letter CR 301. One speaker’s prepared presentation referred to the “mismatch between the MIFR records and the frequency assignments associated with space stations actually in orbit.” His written conclusion was that only good will from administrations could eliminate these mismatches due to a lack of enforcement power at the ITU. However, in light of the new Circular Letter, he changed that conclusion to say that things are now evolving in the right direction.

Will this activism eliminate the mismatches? Countries are sure to contest any such enforcement action given the high stakes for orbital positions. These arguments have gone on for years, as have the attempts to make foster more efficient use of orbits and frequencies. ▮

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