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FEATURE

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A High-Powered Battle

Armed with a new study debunking frequency interference, low-power radio stations are fighting to extend their reach

By Mark Connors

WRYR-FM Radio's tiny studio sits above a Domino's Pizza franchise in the small town of Churchton, Md. Its office space and most of its equipment was donated. The entire staff is volunteer.

And yet, this low-power radio station finds itself at the center of a high-stakes battle with policy-makers for its own slice of the public airwaves.

Armed with an independent study released this summer, supporters of low-power radio are hoping to debunk the frequency interference rationale Congress used three years ago to restrict FM community broadcasters nationwide. If successful, low-power radio stations would be able to broadcast in major markets for the first time, dramatically increasing in number from their current total of 250.

"This is an expression of a desire to localize news and communication services through the FM spectrum," says Richard Hanley, a communications professor at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Conn., who has long studied the broadcasting industry. "There is a gap in local coverage, and there is a sense that low-power service might help bridge that gap."

Since rules governing the licensing of low-power radio stations were first enacted in January 2000 by then-FCC Chairman William Kennard, more than 3,200 applications to broadcast have been filed with the FCC. The initiative allows nonprofit organizations to broadcast on 10- or 100-watt FM signals, provided that their programming is educational and contains no advertising. Most media observers believe licenses for low-power FM radio stations (LPFMs) were introduced to control the proliferation of "illegal" broadcasters while appeasing listeners yearning for greater local content.

Since its inception, however, licensed LPFMs have been a point of controversy between the National Association of Broadcasters and advocates of low-power radio. National Public Radio and others argue that the service may disrupt the signals of full-power stations.

"We don't have any opposition to LPFMs," said NAB spokesman Jeffrey Yorke. "We have opposition to interference, but it ends there. As long as established signals are not interfered with, then we don't have a problem."

In arguing that the FCC largely ignored their concerns when it began licensing low-power stations, the NAB was able to convince Congress to pass the Radio Preservation Act of 2000.

The act's most controversial article is the Third Adjacent Channel requirement, which forces low-power stations to broadcast on frequencies that are at least three channels away from the next high-power station. In other words, if a full-power station is broadcasting on 92.3 FM, the closest available frequency for a low-power station is either 91.7 or 92.9. The requirement eliminated close to 80 percent of low-power licensing applicants from consideration, according to the FCC, and closed nearly every major market to small-time broadcasters.

"[Congress] changed the rules halfway through the game," says Pete Tridish, technical director of the Prometheus Radio Project, a Philadelphia-based

organization that helps low-power stations get on the air. "It defied all reason and precedent, and was a huge blow to low-power radio."

A congressionally mandated independent interference study released in July 2003 questions the rationale behind the requirements. The 308-page study, conducted by the nonprofit research firm MITRE Corp., recommended that blanket Third Adjacent Channel protections be waived. The study also recommends relaxing FCC-mandated land separation requirements for low-power stations, "provided that relatively modest distance separations are maintained between any LPFM station and receivers tuned to the potentially affected FPFM station."

The study reports that low-power stations can operate as close as a few dozen yards away from a full-power radio transmitter without causing any significant interference. The FCC currently requires land separations between four and 58 miles, depending on the strength of the closest full-power radio signal.

The NAB filed 51 pages of comments with the FCC in October criticizing the MITRE study. The NAB argued that Third Adjacent Channel protections should remain in place, and called the study "fatally flawed" because it did not include independent audience listening tests or an economic analysis of the effects of expanded low-power service on full-power stations. The NAB also argued that the study contains "so many major technical errors and omissions" that it must be rendered "unusable" by the FCC.

"Existing broadcasters have a legitimate expectation that they can and will reach their audiences," the filing said.

Low-power radio broadcasters argue that their stations, which can only broadcast, on average, over a 3.5-mile radius, will fill a void in local coverage left by the consolidation of the radio industry. They point to the fact that major broadcasters now report news in Des Moines from studios in San Antonio, or

broadcast a talk show focusing on issues in Tallahassee from a station in New York City.

"In order for these media conglomerates to make economic sense they need to centralize operations as much as possible," Hanley says. "So what we have is a package of local news that's produced far away from the community it's designed to serve."

At WRYY, which was one of the first licensed low-power operations in the nation, the coverage is as local as it gets. It operates on a monthly budget of \$800, and is run by the Southern Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development (SACReD), a local environmental organization best known for saving a 500-acre parcel of land from being developed into a shopping center in 2001.

WRYY's programming is not limited to environmental issues. The station airs about 40 live shows a week, ranging from "The Family Story Hour with Carolyn Stearns" and "Stormy Monday Blues with Bill Evans" to "Gospel Train with Reverend Terry." The station plays everything from jazz to reggae, and airs shows on sports, environmental issues, fortune-telling and history, among others. The deejays include Native Americans, African Americans, senior citizens, mothers, fathers and teenagers. At WRYY, anyone with a voice can do a show.

"We thought that it would be a hell of a lot easier to send a message over the radio than it would be to talk to everyone individually," says station manager Michael Shay. "This gives us a voice in our community."

Given the amount of content the station churns out, it's easy to forget WRYY's broadcasts can only reach a maximum audience of approximately 10,000 residents. It's a point not lost on advocates of the service.

"I just don't see how a station with the power of a light bulb can interfere with the 50,000-watt broadcasters," Shay says.

Many engineering experts agree with Shay's position.

"From an engineering standpoint [the congressional act] is based on no evidence at all," says Donald Mussell, a broadcast engineer in Santa Cruz, Calif., with more than 35 years of experience in the industry. "These interference claims are grossly overblown."

Which is why low-power advocates are hopeful the MITRE study will convince legislators the only interference that needs fixing is that of governmental oversight.

"Low-power radio is a great thing, and I hope people understand that," Shay says. "It has the potential to give everyone a voice in their community."