

Some thoughts on the HFCC Conference in Dallas
by Jeff White

The B11 Seasonal High Frequency Coordination Conference (HFCC) took place in Dallas, Texas September 12-16, 2011, organized by Continental Electronics and the National Association of Shortwave Broadcasters. In my mind, there were four significant points that came out of the conference.

First was the fact that this was the first-ever HFCC Conference to take place in the United States since the organization starting meeting in 1990. The HFCC – now in combination with the Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU) – meets twice each year in different countries around the world. But it had never met in the U.S. In 2004, the NASB attempted to organize the A05 HFCC Conference in Miami, but the Arab countries were afraid that they would not be able to get visas to attend, so the meeting was moved to Mexico City.

But the world of 2004 and the world of today are very different. This year the Arab countries and Iran actually supported the idea of having the HFCC in the U.S., and delegates attended from Algeria, Iran, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia. Now that the precedent has been set, hopefully some of the future meetings of the HFCC can take place in the U.S. again. Major thanks need to be expressed to the U.S. International Broadcasting Bureau and to Trans World Radio for their sponsorship of the meeting, along with that of Continental and the NASB.

The second significant fact about the Dallas conference was that the attendance was fairly similar to that of other recent HFCC meetings. Many people thought that due to recent reductions in shortwave transmissions by some of the major international broadcasters would lead to a much-reduced attendance at the HFCC in Dallas. But some 100 delegates from 32 countries and 40 frequency management organizations around the world took part. And it was obvious from the “collision lists” produced at the conference that even though a lot of stations have cut back on their shortwave frequencies recently, the HF bands are still quite crowded and it can still be difficult to find a clear frequency amidst the congestion of the shortwave bands.

The third important news item from Dallas was the decision by HFCC members to expand the scope of their organization. While Chairman Oldrich Cip made it clear that this will still be primarily a shortwave frequency coordination conference, members voted to amend the articles of incorporation to expand the scope of the HFCC to include so-called “alternative delivery platforms” for international radio – things like the Internet, satellite, podcasts, local AM and FM radio relays, etc. Chairman Cip suggested that future meetings might devote one day of the week-long conference to these alternative delivery methods. In part, this move is intended to counter the outflow of HFCC members who have ended or might end their HF broadcasts for budgetary or other reasons.

Finally, DRM – Digital Radio Mondiale – stood out as a highlight of this most recent HFCC/ASBU Conference. While some people had already written off DRM as a “saviour” of shortwave due to the lack of mass-market low-priced DRM receivers, DRM Consortium Vice Chairman Ludo Maes showed up at the HFCC in Dallas a few days after helping to introduce some new low-cost (under \$100) DRM receivers at the IBC in Amsterdam. Maes showed three of these new receivers at a special DRM presentation at the HFCC in Dallas, and he told delegates that more of these types of receivers are coming in the near future. He told the HFCC that the governments of Russia and India have decided to undertake major expansions of their domestic and international transmitter networks, all using the DRM system.

Adil Mina of Continental Electronics, the only manufacturer of high-powered shortwave transmitters in the U.S., said that while many stations have reduced their shortwave transmissions, others are investing in new, modernized DRM-capable units. He said that all new orders for HF broadcast transmitters are requiring DRM capability.

So things are not as bleak as some would suggest in the shortwave industry. And if new low-cost digital receivers appear on the market in the near future, DRM could still spur a renaissance of shortwave radio. Some cynics will say “we've heard all this before,” but Adil Mina proclaimed that “now our promises are coming close to reality.”

Jeff White is president of the National Association of Shortwave Broadcasters and was chairman of the HFCC/ASBU B11 Conference Committee.