

Strays – Rules enforcement

If the amateur radio rules we follow are listed in the US government [Code of Federal Regulations](#), does that mean they are also regarded as *laws*? As was mentioned in [this month's Cover Story](#), only Congress can technically enact laws, but that's a moot point, since failure to adhere to regulations put forth by the FCC (the "Commission") can result in consequences similar to disobedience to federal laws.

Ok, so if the FCC rules demand our compliance, what happens when we don't comply? Can they actually enforce those rules? It turns out that they are empowered to do just that. One major problem facing enforcement, however, is the bandwidth (enough manpower and time) required to sufficiently enforce all the FCC rules. With over 800,000 licensed amateurs in the US, even with 20% activity, that's a lot of QSOs to monitor for violations, and today's FCC simply does not have the number of people needed to police all those would-be criminals.

Once upon a time, in the days when the FCC had a lot more time on their hands, they had minions who monitored the airwaves for violators. When they discovered an operator who failed to say his call sign timely or accidentally talked over another, they sent the violator a "pink slip" (regardless of actual color), that indicated the date, time, and nature of the violation by the licensee named on the citation.

The program generated so much unnecessary paperwork and heartache resulting from nit-picky "crimes", that the FCC was met with quite a lot of unpleasant complaints of pettiness. This forced the Commission to start sending pink slips of "Good Operator Reports" to amateurs who demonstrated exemplary operating practice in an effort to stem the tide of hate mail, which actually did little to help.

In 1982 the FCC created the OO (official observer) program of volunteers who performed the verification for the FCC, and reported their rules violation incidents. The OOs sent out potential violation notices via postcard, and that reduced the frequency of reported violations because the OOs were instructed to not be so nit-picky. In 2020 the OO program was retired, replaced by the VM (volunteer monitor) program, a much more passively relaxed team.

Today, while you can report any infraction to the FCC, they tend to only focus on the most serious violations. In those cases, the FCC asks a VM to verify



the complaint, especially when it recurs frequently. If the VM can verify the violation, they report their findings to the FCC, and the Commission decides whether and what kind of action to take against the violator. Often the "action" is a letter threatening to cancel the operator's license and possibly confiscate his amateur radio equipment if certain expectations are not met. And just about as often, that's where the action ends, once the violator complies with the requests to meet their demands.

While browsing the lower bands, you might have encountered two curious HF frequencies, on which operators blatantly violate rules regarding music, obscene language, call sign failures, and generally poor operating practice. You might also have wondered why the FCC doesn't do something about them, especially since they are on night after night. Well, first, you don't know that the FCC is doing nothing about them. Second, it's rumored that there is an unwritten compromise to tolerate that behavior if the violators confine their bad behavior to those two frequencies. So, if that's true, and you don't want to hear their X-rated QSO, then [just spin the big knob](#).

We find that, even if the FCC had the bandwidth to hire a large watchdog force, today's amateurs don't truly need much enforcement because **they strive to follow the rules**. There will always be exceptions, but the kind of person willing to study and pass today's amateur radio examinations are typically not the type who flagrantly violate the rules.

