



Low Power FM Radio

Empowering Community Voices

Low Power FM stations (LPFM) are community-based, non-commercial radio stations that operate at 100 watts or less. Allowing LPFM stations on the air empowers local broadcasters to serve their communities with a variety of new voices and services. LPFM stations are able to address the interests of specific groups including minority groups, religious and linguistic communities, and provide a forum for debate about important local issues. LPFM stations strengthen community identity in urban neighborhoods, rural towns and other communities that are currently too small to win much attention from "mainstream", ratings-driven media.

Low Power Radio Service Re-Established

Historically, community-based low power radio stations have been an important part of radio broadcasting. However, in the 1970s, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) put a freeze on issuing these low wattage licenses. In January 1999, the FCC issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to establish a new class of community-based, non-commercial low power FM radio stations. Thousands of potential broadcasters – schools, churches, musicians, engineers, media activists and people from all walks of life – filed comments in the Rule Making, demonstrating enormous popular support for this new licensing class. In January 2000, the FCC voted in favor this proposal. This was a huge victory for communities nationwide where, in many instances, consolidation of commercial media outlets has led to decreased localism and diversity on the airwaves.

Opponents Warn of “Oceans of Interference”

Incumbent broadcasters, represented in large part by the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), opposed the idea. In its testimony before Congress, the NAB warned that the FM radio dial would be drowned in "oceans of interference" if the FCC was allowed to go forward with Low Power FM radio station licensing. Most observers agreed that this was a red herring and masked the incumbent broadcasters' real concern: that these new stations would represent additional competition for radio listeners for the existing broadcasters.

How the FCC Regulates Interference

The FCC has been regulating radio and setting interference standards for seventy years. The existing FCC rules mandate that full-power radio stations – from 6,000 to 50,000 watts – be licensed at intervals on the dial to prevent interference. In 2000, in response to overwhelming demand and a deep understanding of the technology, the FCC decided that LPFM licenses should be made available on open frequencies on the third-adjacent channel between existing transmissions in the same area. In part the FCC engineers based their recommendation on their experience with stations that already resided within two channels of separation, many of which had been grandfathered in before the current – and more stringent – interference rules had been implemented. After establishing these guidelines and others, the FCC opened the applications window and began the licensing process.

What is Low Power FM?

A new non-commercial 100 watt broadcast radio service that reaches a radius of 3 to 7 miles, operating on the regular FM dial.

Who can get a license to operate a Low Power Radio FM station?

This radio license is available to community groups, high schools, labor unions, churches and other nonprofit organizations that would like to reach out to a small, geographically concentrated group of individuals.

How many Low Power FM radio stations are operating in the US today?

About 300 radio stations, broadcasting at 100 watts or less, are currently successfully serving communities across the country, with many more in the process of applying for a license.

Low Power Radio Works

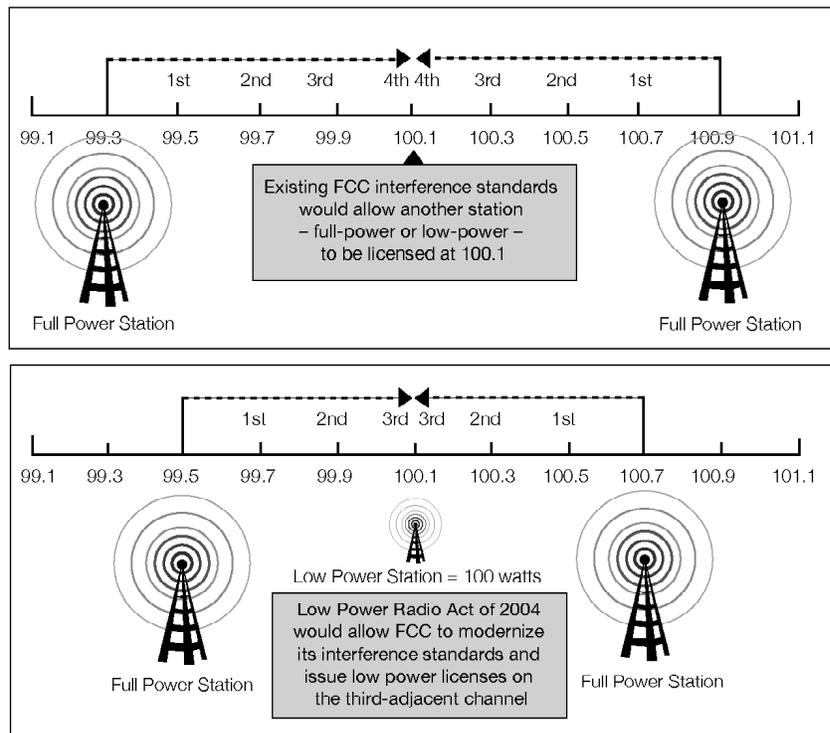
In Opelousas, Louisiana, the Southern Development Foundation (SDF) works for school reform, community supported agriculture, and neighborhood economic development. They also host the world's largest traditional Zydeco music festival. The SDF is the first civil rights organization in the United States ever to own its own radio station. They host current affairs talk shows with many major politicians around the state, musical events, and religious programming. Their executive director, John Freeman, says, "We pride ourselves on being part of this democratic project."

In Ocean City, Maryland, the Edinboro Early School Station has been running for over a year, broadcasting 24 hours a day. Their goal is to recreate the flavor of an early 50's radio station, with family oriented programming focusing on music of the fifties and early sixties, with some classical music mixed in. They have 3 hours of programming a day for children from 3-5 years old, reaching schools, daycare centers, and homes around this city. The station itself is based in The Gold Coast shopping mall, with glass walls on three sides of the broadcast booth so community members can see what's happening in the station. Other programming includes: real estate and finance talk shows; a church news bulleting board; and field broadcasts from historical sites.

Appropriations Rider Curtails LPFM Availability

Unfortunately, the availability of these new LPFM licenses was quickly curtailed by Congress. Responding to tremendous pressure from the broadcast lobby, Congress passed the "Radio Broadcasting Preservation Act" in December 2000. This bill, which was a rider tacked on to a larger appropriations bill, denied the FCC the ability to modernize its existing interference protection standards. As a result, the Radio Broadcasting Preservation Act eliminated about 75 percent of the original LPFM licensing opportunities, predominantly in the most densely populated areas, leaving only one new station available in the top fifty American cities.

FM Frequency and Interference Protection Standards



This bill also took away the FCC's ability to manage interference issues on its own. The Act decreed that the FCC could not change existing interference requirements to accommodate LPFM stations, and required the FCC to hire an outside entity to conduct field tests to resolve the issue of LPFM's potential for third adjacent channel interference. The results would be presented to Congress, which would then determine whether to allow the licensing of low power radio in more populated areas.

MITRE Study Results Released: Interference Not An Issue

After three years of inquiry and testing, the interference study was released in July 2003. The MITRE Corporation, a preeminent engineering firm hired by the FCC to conduct the study, found no significant problems with third adjacent channel interference and recommended the lifting of the burdensome restrictions imposed by Congress in December 2000 upon the new LPFM radio service. In other words, the interference concerns raised by the NAB were, as predicted by Low Power advocates, unfounded.

Low Power Radio's Success

Despite the stringent interference requirements placed on the service in 2000, LPFM has been an undeniable success. Thousands of organizations have applied for licenses, and about 300 stations are on the air as of June 2004. Moreover, LPFM stations are having a remarkable impact, offering local non-commercial programming that meets the needs of the communities they serve.

Only Congress Has the Power to Let Low Power Radio Flourish

Now that the MITRE study has proven that interference is not a concern, it will take congressional action to expand licensing opportunities for Low Power FM stations.

On June 4, Senators McCain and Leahy introduced S 2505, the "Low Power Radio Act of 2004". This bill would repeal the Radio Broadcasting Preservation Act passed in December 2000 and lift the third-adjacent minimum distance requirements.

If passed, this bill would allow the licensing low power stations in more populated and urban areas, where commercial and corporate radio currently dominates.

Supporters of Low Power FM urge Congress to:

- **Recognize Low Power FM radio as a source of local and diverse programming for many communities.**
- **Pass S 2505, the Low Power Radio Act of 2004, which could allow the licensing and construction of thousands of Low Power radio stations in more densely-populated areas and cities.**

We know there's room in America's dialogue for many voices from many communities. Support their right to be heard. **Support LPFM.**

For further information, contact:

Free Press: John Gray (202) 265-1490

Future of Music Coalition: Michael Bracy (202) 331-2958

Media Access Project: Cheryl Leanza (202) 454-5683

National Federation of Community Broadcasters:
Carol Pierson, Kai Aiyetoro (510) 451-8200

Prometheus Radio Project: Pete Tridish, Hannah Sassaman (215) 727-9620

United Church of Christ: Gloria Tristani (202) 263-2586

Partial List of Organizations Supporting Low Power FM:

- Media Access Project
- Prometheus Radio Project
- Future of Music Coalition
- National Federation of Community Broadcasters
- Free Press
- American Library Association
- AFL-CIO
- Ben Bagdikian, Berkeley Communications Dept.
- Black Citizens for a Fair Media
- Jackson Browne
- Communications Workers of America
- Consumers Union
- Grassroots Radio Coalition
- Indigo Girls
- Int'l Bridge, Tunnel, and Turnpike Association
- League of United Latin American Citizens
- Louisiana Music Commission
- Evang. Lutheran Church in America, Dept. for Com.
- Ellis Marsalis
- Gen'l Bd. of Global Ministry, The United Methodist Church
- NAACP
- National Bar Association
- National Council of Churches of Christ, Com. Comm'n
- National Council of La Raza
- National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts
- National Lawyers Guild
- National League of Cities
- Rainbow/PUSH Coalition
- Bonnie Raitt
- Solveig Singleton, CATO Institute
- United Church of Christ, Office of Communication, Inc.
- United States Catholic Conference
- United States Public Interest Research Group