

# **Special Call Signs in Canada**

## **A Recommendation for Change**

### **Executive Summary**

Operating with a special call sign has been a novel and exciting experience for many Canadian amateurs. Others view special call signs as simply one of many facets of participation in the observance of an anniversary of a significant historical or community event. Whatever the level of personal involvement might be, the special call sign activity begins with the issuance of an authorization from Industry Canada.

Special call signs are popular with the Contest Community the world over and because it is a readily identifiable group, a survey was conducted among Canadian contesters to identify the degree of satisfaction with the special call sign allocation process in Canada. Canada has fallen behind other IARU countries with respect to the flexibility of the special call sign allocation process and the survey confirmed that change was desired.

The recommendations arising from the survey were expanded after further consultation to encompass the needs of all special interest groups desirous of obtaining a special call sign authorization for any reasonable purpose and are summarized herein. No change in the “reasonable purpose” criteria for issuance is suggested.

The principal policy changes recommended are twofold:

- Removal of the ties between the type of special event and the specific call sign construction thus making it possible for all Canadian prefix/suffix constructions to be available for all types of special events.
- A change to an equitable period of use whether 30 or 60 days annually for category IV issues.

Additional lesser changes stemming from the consultations are recommended.

This document seeks your support for the recommended changes and your support for soliciting the involvement of RAC to petition Industry Canada for amendments to both policy and regulations to achieve the changes.

## **1. Background**

In recent years many IARU member countries have expanded their special call sign allocations to accommodate a broader spectrum of events including the needs of amateur radio contesters. For a comparison on how special call signs are handling by other IARU member countries see [http://www.radiosport.ca/RSC-documents/2x1\\_allocation.pdf](http://www.radiosport.ca/RSC-documents/2x1_allocation.pdf) . In Canada, Industry Canada (IC) has issued “Special Event” call signs for many years but principally related to commemorative historical events or ongoing special events where “special” was somewhat subjectively defined. Until recently, contesters desiring a special call sign for a particular contest event were faced with having to choose (or perhaps invent) a sufficiently special event that fit with the IC policy in order to be issued a special call sign. Policy was described in IC’s document RIC-9 which set out the ground rules for special call sign issuance

In October 2005, IC amended RIC-9 to “Issue 2” and contests were given status as a type of special event for which a limited selection of special call signs could be issued. RIC-9 Issue 2 also defines additional rules for the issuance of special call signs for use in contests. While Issue 2 is an encouraging development, a majority of the Canadian contesters consulted by Radio Sport Canada in early 2006 stated that it falls short of expectations.

This document is primarily concerned with policy change and recommends change in the way special call signs are issued for contest and other special event purposes. For the most part, implementation details are left to be worked out by mutual agreement among the stakeholders. The document will be circulated to clubs and individuals to invite comment from the amateur community at large, beyond the core contester community surveyed thus far. We will invite comment on the viability of the proposed policy changes and seek agreement about taking the changes to Government with a strong recommendation for adoption based on widespread support from Canada’s amateur community.

## **2. The Issues**

### **2.1 The desire for change**

Informal discussion among members of the Canadian contesting community revealed a measure of unhappiness with the limited availability of special call signs for use in contests. The membership observed other national jurisdictions offering relatively easy processes by which a special time-limited call sign assignment could be made. They perceived Canada to be falling behind, instead of leading the pack in innovation. Further discussion led to the creation of Radio Sport Canada which is dedicated to finding a way to satisfy the stated desires of the contesting community while acknowledging and preserving the authority and administrative responsibility of IC with respect to amateur licensing.

## **2.2 Existing RIC-9 Issue 2 provisions**

RIC-9 defines a subset of available Canadian call sign prefixes that are available to National, Regional and Municipal Special Event applicants and an even more limited, second subset available to Special Call Signs with Special Prefix applicants. Special call sign usage for National events is limited to 60 days and Regional and Municipal events to 30 days. Contest applications lead to call signs in the second subset of special prefixes and applications are made pursuant to the provisions of RIC-9 Section 2.2 Category IV.

RIC-9 limits the period of use to the events falling within 60-day window that in practice can be judiciously chosen to encompass two related contest events that follow each other on the contest event calendar. For typical weekend contests, this means only 4 actual days of use during the 60-day window, unlike the National or Regional Event usage which allows 60 or 30 days of use. There is no provision for longer periods of use, let alone permanent/lifetime assignment limited to use for contest events.

At present, a single fee of \$60 covers a single 60-day period and additional 60-day periods are fee-payable as and when additional applications succeed.

RIC-9 does not define a list of contests and thus implicitly a moving set of dates for which special call signs may be obtained by application. Instead, RIC-9 incorporates by reference a list of contests recommended to IC by RAC<sup>1</sup>. This list currently includes the ARRL DX contests (CW and SSB), CQWDX contests (CW and SSB), CQWPX contests (CW and SSB), the IARU HF contest, the RAC Canada Day contest and the RAC Winter contest.

## **2.3 Call sign administration**

Call sign administration is done by staff at Industry Canada's Amateur Radio Service Centre (ARSC) where, as in many federal departments and agencies having direct public contact, the workload is often more than available staff and IT resources can cope with.

The database system used by IC cannot directly handle 2x1 or 2x4 call sign constructions and significant manual intervention is required for each application processed.

Despite the acknowledged ARSC resource shortfall, IC has apparently expressed a firm resolve to maintain total administrative responsibility for amateur licensing despite offers from RAC to undertake at least some administrative tasks.

While various e-Government initiatives have created publicly accessible on-line business processes with other federal departments and agencies, the Amateur Radio Service Centre is perhaps many budget cycles away from similar deployments.

---

<sup>1</sup> RAC Board Motion #35/06 [http://www.rac.ca/service/BoardMinutes\\_2006-10-17.pdf](http://www.rac.ca/service/BoardMinutes_2006-10-17.pdf)

### **3. Actions taken**

#### **3.1 RSC website**

The RSC [website](#) was activated in January 2006. The stated objective of the RSC website is *to alter the way 2x1 call signs are issued for use in radio sporting events, and to strongly recommend a process that better meets the needs of both IC and the radio sport community.* An eight step action plan was implemented consisting of (1) gather background information, (2) gather consensus of 2x1 needs from Canadian radio sporting community, (3) prepare position document (draft 1), (4). share document with Canadian radio sporting community by email and gather feedback, (5) modify position document (draft 2), (6) share needs with general amateur radio community at club meetings and gather feedback, (7) prepare final draft of position paper and (8) secure the support of RAC to present this proposal to IC. This document represents the completion of step 3.

#### **3.2 Survey**

In early 2006, some basic research was conducted by RSC to ascertain the size of the Canadian contest community and to gather the opinions of the community with respect to the issuance of special call signs for use in contests. As part of this initiative, a survey was conducted by RSC wherein more than 500 amateurs were polled and the results were published on the RSC website along with the characterization of the size of the community. The community sizing details are at:  
[http://www.radiosport.ca/RSC-documents/CRSC\\_characterization-R1.pdf](http://www.radiosport.ca/RSC-documents/CRSC_characterization-R1.pdf)

### **4. Results**

#### **4.1 RSC website**

The RSC website contains general background information on how other IARU countries handle special call signs, how members of the Canadian contest community contribute to the broader amateur radio community and a detailed summary of the survey responses.

#### **4.2 Survey**

Readers are encouraged to review the complete results of the 2006 poll, which begin at [http://www.radiosport.ca/RSC-documents/survey\\_overview.php](http://www.radiosport.ca/RSC-documents/survey_overview.php) but for the purposes of this document, the salient consensus issues are:

4.2.1 There was not unanimous agreement with the 9 contests recommended to IC by RAC. Respondents frequently noted the absence of popular contests such as the ARRL 10M contest and various RTTY events.

4.2.2 The Top Ten prefixes preferred for *contest* use by respondents are VE, CF, XM, CK, VC, XK, XL, CG, XO and VX. Of the Top Ten preferred prefixes identified by the 500 active testers who were polled, only one (VC) is presently allocated pursuant to RIC-9 Section 2.2 Category 4, and VE is not considered special, except in a 2x1 construction.

4.2.3 Most respondents would like to see lower fees, but an equal number seem content with the current \$60 fee. Between 5 and 10% of respondents are prepared to pay \$100 and more for a special call sign, terms of use not disclosed.

4.2.4 A strong majority of respondents would like to use the special call sign for at least a year.

4.2.5 A similar strong majority believe the call sign should remain inactive for a full year after its use period has ended.

4.2.6 A broad spectrum of ideas was received as to how a 2x1 or other special call sign improves one's competitive position. See the details at <http://www.radiosport.ca/RSC-documents/Q6.php>

4.2.7 The survey asked for opinion as to the contribution made to amateur radio by the contesting community. A significant number of comments highlighted the increased band activity as a desirable alternative to the usual weekday *inactivity* that makes our spectrum allocations tenuous at best due to disuse. Details are at: <http://www.radiosport.ca/RSC-documents/Q7.php>

4.2.8 A similar question invited comment on the contest community's contribution to the public. A central theme among responses was the continued availability of highly skilled communicators able to get messages through under marginal conditions in fast paced emergency situations. Details are at: <http://www.radiosport.ca/RSC-documents/Q8.php>

4.2.9 Finally, general comments were solicited and it is well worth the reader's time to review these at: <http://www.radiosport.ca/RSC-documents/Q9.php> While these represent a broad range of opinion, the overall tone of the comments supports the specific opinions expressed in answer to the specific questions of the survey.

## 5. Recommendations

After considering the survey result, this initiative would seem to have conflicting objectives. The desires of the contesting community are clear, and in the context of the stated objectives, we have a "we want more, for less" situation, but based on the survey result, only a few are prepared to pay even part of the cost of more. We make this statement with the understanding that the aforementioned resource shortages within IC are real, and that additional call sign allocations simply exacerbate that situation. On a cost recovery basis, the majority of contesters are not prepared to pay enough per call sign to support additional resources within IC, assuming there was actually a way to increment the IC resources within Civil Service criteria. Innovative measures are called for if the 2 x 1 call sign initiative is to succeed.

The recommendations that follow are fundamentally achievable, yet as with most innovation, will require some "outside the box" thinking by stakeholders. They are presented in no particular order of priority or importance, but it should be understood that there are linkages between individual recommendations that improve the viability of the group of recommendations as a whole.

### 5.1 Special Purpose call sign allocation

We recommend that the special event and special purpose definitions and criteria set out in Section 2 of RIC-9 Issue 2 continue as guidelines, except for the specific prefix designations defined for specific types of events. The list of eligible annual contests referred to in Section 2.2 of this document should be reviewed with RAC and other stakeholders as soon as possible along with the viability of a strictly-enforced 60-day window. Strict enforcement of the 60-day window would exclude some contest pairs in some years.

### 5.2 All available prefixes should be available for allocation

By international agreement<sup>2</sup>, Canada has been granted use of these alphanumeric groups: CFA-CKZ, CYA-CZZ, VAA-VGZ, VOA-VOZ, VXA-VYZ and XJA-XOZ. For amateur purposes, these allocations produce all the two-letter combinations suggested by the foregoing 3-letter groups e.g. XJ, XK, XL, XM, XN and XO from the XJA-XOZ allocation. Table 1 in RIC-9 Issue 2 shows at least 3,276 possible 2x1 call sign constructions, ignoring the current allocation policies and without using the missing combinations with prefixes like XJ, XN and others. We believe that this pool is large enough to accommodate the anticipated need for all special event observations, even if permanently allocated special call signs were permitted. It should be noted that during the years 1997 through 2006 and excluding 2001 for which no data is available, only 128 special call signs and/or prefixes were authorized by IC.

We recommend that Canadian amateurs be allowed to use any prefix assigned to Canada by International agreement for any special issue purpose. This recommendation includes all the prefixes from Table 1 of RIC-9 Issue 2 plus the not-listed constructions that would include, as examples, XN3 for Ontario, XK4 for Manitoba, etc, so long as the call sign is a special-issue and not for everyday use.

Prefixes and Suffixes for a Special Issue Call Sign	
RIC-9 Categories I, II and III	RIC-9 Category IV – Contest events
Any prefix and suffix combination authorized for use in Canada that is not already issued or dormant	Any prefix and suffix combination authorized for use in Canada that is not already issued or dormant

This recommendation essentially suggests removal of the relationship between available prefixes and the purpose-for issue (i.e. the Categories and sub-Categories of RIC-9 Sec 2.2) of special call signs. It leaves only the period of use as dependent on the purpose-for issue.

Period of Use for a Special Issue Call Sign	
RIC-9 Categories I, II and III	RIC-9 Category IV – Contest events
30 to 60 days depending on the event	A total of 30-60 days throughout the year

While shortages of special call signs for some types of special events might be perceived to exist in larger population regions, we believe these are implementation details best addressed

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.itu.int/cgi-bin/htsh/glad/cga\\_callsign.sh?lng=E&sort\\_by=0](http://www.itu.int/cgi-bin/htsh/glad/cga_callsign.sh?lng=E&sort_by=0)

by consultation among the stakeholders. That consultation should adopt some minimum allocation criteria for discussion including, in no particular order:

- Additional prefixes for Newfoundland and Labrador
- The sanctity of the CY prefix
- Special issue call signs need to be distinguishable from permanent call signs
- Special issue call signs need to unambiguously indicate the geographic region
- A single distinctive construction for all special commemorative event call signs
- A single distinctive construction for all RIC-9 Category-IV contest events

### **5.3 A 1-year term for some special issue call signs**

Issuing some categories of special call signs for a full year period-of-use satisfies two objective criteria and this applies to any special-issue call sign, whether 2x1 or not:

- a. The stated wishes of the majority of survey respondents are met, and
- b. The administrative workload at the ARSC is reduced materially due to fewer applications

The fact that fewer dollars in fee collections will be available to ARSC as a result fewer applications is probably not material in the grand scheme. It is worth noting that currently, a Special Event call sign issued for commemorative observation allows 30 or 60 calendar days of use, while a call sign issued for a designated contest event allows only 4 calendar days of use.

We recommend that all call signs issued pursuant to the existing RIC-9 Category IV for contest events be assigned for a period of 1 calendar year from the date of issue for use only in designated contests.

### **5.4 A 1-year dormant period after the period of use**

Whether a call sign is issued for use for a 1 full year or for the current 60 days, the survey results indicate that the call sign should be “retired” for a full year before being reissued. This year is to allow the QSL fulfillment process to catch up and the QSL demand to abate. We thus recommend that any special-issue call sign not be available for reissue for a period of one calendar year after the assigned period of use has ended unless renewed by the current holder<sup>3</sup>. While some QSL managers responding to the survey indicated 1 year might be too short, many factors impact the choice of a dormant period. It is possible that reissue to the recent holder and reissue to a new holder should be treated differently, but this potentially complicates the administrative procedure.

### **5.5 Unburden ARSC**

In order for this or any proposal for change to succeed, a way *might* be needed to relieve the Service Centre of mundane clerical tasks, yet allow the regulatory agency, Industry Canada,

---

<sup>3</sup> The survey indicated a desire by many individuals to have a special 2x1 call sign for contest use and to have that call sign in perpetuity. An alternative to perpetuity might be simple annual renewal.

to retain the desired level of control over the business process and to retain administrative responsibility at the international level for the actions of Canadian amateurs.

In Canada, the existing Accredited Examiner program lays some groundwork for “civilians” performing heretofore “Government” administrative tasks on a volunteer basis. In the United States, the National Conference of Volunteer Examiner Coordinators (NCVEC)<sup>4</sup> performs similar examination administration on behalf of the Federal Communications Commission and in addition, administers the FCC’s 1x1 call sign program. We believe a framework such as described below *might* be viable to unburden the Service Centre.

1. A volunteer group (hereinafter the VG) of sufficiently knowledgeable individuals is assembled and mandated to act as the “front end” of the application process.
2. The principal function of the VG is to screen applications and maintain contact with the applicant such as would result in a “flawless” application form that needs only fee collection (i.e. cheque cashing) and one-time data entry to be fulfilled and become an issued call sign. All such communication between the applicant and the VG will be by electronic means wherever possible.
3. On a periodic basis (perhaps quarterly or bi-monthly) and according to an agreed protocol, a package of pre-screened applications is forwarded to the ARSC for fulfillment.
4. Traditional paper-based methods can continue until such time as the Service Centre is e-business enabled.
5. The VG will use whatever applicant authentication and call sign purpose criteria are acceptable to the ARSC.
6. VG record keeping will be by whatever means meet the needs of the ARSC.

## 6. Next Steps

The next steps of the action plan outlined at <http://www.radiosport.ca/> are these:

### 6.1 Circulate to the general amateur community

This draft will be circulated to the amateur community at large, making use of Club presentations where possible and additional feedback will be solicited. Approximate timeframe: Spring 2007

### 6.2 Prepare a final draft of the Position Paper

Based on the feedback obtained in the previous step, the final draft of the Position Paper will be prepared. This version of the Position Paper will represent the views of a significant segment of Canada’s amateur population and should be ready for presentation by mid-summer 2007.

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ncvec.org/>



### **6.3 Present the Position Paper**

We will solicit the support of RAC by presenting the paper to RAC officials with a recommendation that it be tabled at the next scheduled CARAB meeting.

Please send comments and suggestions concerning the contents of this proposal to [comments@radiosport.ca](mailto:comments@radiosport.ca).