

MSA Safety & Medical Frequency A Quick Question?

In 1976, the then RACMSA, took out a licence for 86.4375 MHz AM, the Safety & Medical Frequency. Now, more than 25 years later, the existing frequency is being replaced by a new one operating on 81.575 MHz FM. This new frequency will be the only exclusive frequency for safety on rallies from 1 June 2003. With more than 1200 sets licensed for 86, the migration will be a challenge to all concerned.

Here, Tony Newsum, Rallies and Trials Executive, provides responses to some key frequently asked question.

Why has the 86.4375 licence been withdrawn at such short notice?

Following a review of frequency bands by the Radiocommunications Agency (RA) who grant the licence for using the frequency, use of 86 was no longer available to the MSA. On safety grounds we were left with no alternative but to move to a new frequency that will guarantee exclusivity. This is vital in itself as it means we shouldn't have any interference from other users which in the south of England includes the French Pompiers!

What has the MSA done to extend the life of the current licence?

Discussions have been ongoing with the RA for some time and the expiry date of 31 May 2003 is actually a six month extension on what was originally offered.

What is happening to Red?

Red is not a UK wide, exclusive frequency and as such could not be considered a replacement to 86. It's use also doesn't fall under the control of the MSA. We know the frequency is continuing, but users should check their own licence to ensure they fully comply with the conditions of use.

Has consideration been given to other alternatives such as high band FM and digital?

Both were considered and discounted. High Band FM would lose signal strength whilst it was felt that there is still too much uncertainty over the longer term positioning of digital where kit is also more expensive. It would also have been more difficult to secure exclusivity within these frequencies that are heavily populated by commercial users. Remember that 31 May is fixed, so we had to move quickly to make a decision.

What is being done to ensure that we, as a sport, don't find ourselves in the same situation again in the future?

The RA may have imposed the expiry date for 86 but they have also been very supportive through discussions, recognising the particular requirements of a motor sports safety frequency and the need for clear communications with no interference, and we continue to work closely with them. We share the concerns of all licence holders and clubs regarding the short time scales but in this instance there really was no alternative. 86 has been with us for more than 25 years. It would be unrealistic to suggest that 81 FM will be with us for that length of time. The fact that the new licence is exclusive means that we will have to undertake more self monitoring of its use and through the Radio Co-ordinators we will continually assess the long term view so that changes are communicated as soon as possible.

What MHz is the new frequency and what specification, including power output, will apply to the sets?

The new frequency is 81.575 MHz FM. A minimum specification has been defined and is attached. We believe this is a reasonable specification, building in functionality such as automated time out, which will help system management on events, particularly if mikes get trapped. Power output will be limited to 10 watts. As 81 FM is an exclusive frequency we will be actively monitoring to ensure that all sets do comply with the minimum specification. Automated Number Identification (ANI), which is included as part of the spec will assist with this as it will tie the set back to a user and to a licence. Confirmation of set specification will also be required when licenses are first applied for.

Is there truth in the statement that an FM signal is either receivable or not. There is no working in the noise as with AM?

Yes, this is the case generally. AM signals 'bend' and as such had variable strength. With FM you will get a strong, clear readable signal. The opportunity of 'working in the noise' will be more limited on FM. As a direct result of this event organisers will have to confirm that locations previously used on 86 will still work on FM. Also with FM you could expect to receive a more readable signal than AM where transmissions are weaker.

What is the likely cost of the new equipment and will there be financial assistance?

Initial indications are that new kit, fully meeting the licence specification, and with two years warranty, should be available for about E210 plus VAT. Unfortunately there is no pot of gold to fund the migration but the Club Development Fund has agreed that a degree of financial assistance will be available to assist the purchase of new sets. The exact mechanics of this are still being finalised. This facility is available to all crews including those who are not directly affiliated to a club, provided they get a recognised club to sponsor their application. Availability of second hand kit, and its cost will vary but expect to pay about £100. This will not qualify for grant assistance.

How do we purchase this new equipment?

New kit can be purchased through reputable radio engineers. It should be noted that a licence application **must** be supported by a specification document from the recognised engineer / supplier detailing that the set being licensed does meet the minimum MSA specification.

What will be the new licence period and cost to users?

Existing 86 licenses will automatically continue until 31 May 2003 at no extra cost. Applications for the new 81 FM licence will be available from 1 January 2003 to allow for a gradual migration plus to let events check routes for events later in the year. Irrespective of when the application is made, new FM licenses will be valid until 31 May 2004, with renewal then failing on 1 June annually. It is hoped to keep costs in line with current levels.