

AmRRON Temporarily Suspends the use of Winlink System: (white paper) 20 May 2019

Statement of Purpose: To give notice of AmRRON's official policy suspending the use of the Winlink global email service for *most* operations.

In response to a recent policy and procedural change by the Winlink development team, AmRRON will not be adopting an official policy to include the use of the global email service until further notice.

Winlink now hosts a page where the general public is encouraged to inspect all email traffic passed by Amateur Radio users. When the ham community first became aware of this in early May 2019, the history could be searched as far back as three years. One improvement was made by the Winlink team, and that is a limit of only 21 days of viewable history.

UPDATE 5/23: After speaking directly with a Winlink representative, we have learned that this is expected to be a temporary move to meet requirements that were the result of a complaint filed with the FCC regarding compression being confused with encryption. They assured us they are working on a solution and reiterated they believe this is ONLY TEMPORARY. They did not provide an estimated resolution date but assured us they are working tirelessly on it.

The link to this publicly-accessible page is here:
https://winlink.org/content/us_amateur_radio_message_viewer

The contents of the Winlink user's 'Messages Sent' and 'Messages Received' folders are apparently uploaded to the Winlink servers once the operator connects to the internet.

UPDATE 5/23: This was confirmed in our telephone conversation with the Winlink representative.

The previous 21 days of each operator's traffic then becomes viewable and searchable by anyone in the world with internet access.

This brings serious privacy concerns, as we have used Winlink Express to a great extent during training and real-world emergencies, to include health and welfare traffic, sending updates regarding evacuated communities, logistical coordination, and municipal government personnel details that could expose their employees' personal information, leading to exploitation by identity thieves, the media, and others.

We know and accept that the Sysops (gateway System Operators) can and DO (and always have) indeed read the contents of the traffic going through their gateway node to ensure illegal activity or other abuse of the Amateur Radio bands is not taking place. However, the Amateur Radio community has (and SHOULD have) a '**reasonable expectation**' of privacy with regard to having their email traffic posted publicly on the internet. This includes when sending emails or texts to (or on behalf of) officials and loved ones who entrust us with the reliable and safe handling of their traffic.

UPDATE 5/23: Correction. We initially stated that it appears that the Winlink Express program will not even open up unless the operator is connected to the internet. Numerous operators reported this in the first couple of weeks in May. When asked about this, the Winlink representative flatly rejected that their development team had altered the software programs to render Winlink Express inoperable without an internet connection. They had no explanation and neither do we. In the previous days, all but one AmRRON Operator (of those who have reported back to me) can now open his Winlink Express program regardless of whether their internet connection is on or off.

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NOTE: While the Winlink Express Global Email service has not been 'officially' included into AmRRON operations, it has been used heavily as an unofficial tool that has proven to be invaluable to our operators, including during real-world emergencies. Unfortunately, due to these recent policy changes, Winlink Express protocols will not be included in the upcoming Version 4 release of the SOI (due to be released June 2019).

The nationwide (and beyond) network of AmRRON operators have been avid users and promoters of Winlink Express for years. We appreciate all the hard work the Winlink development team has done over the years and want to encourage them to continue providing such a great service. While we disagree with this latest policy decision, we stand behind them in their efforts to find a solution that will protect the service they've provided to Amateur Radio operators for decades.

We do not wish for any Amateur Radio operators to abandon Winlink as a tool. It is still the most viable tool for sending emails and phone texts (from email) that is out there. We are merely temporarily suspending Winlink from being added as an 'official' part of our Signals Operating Instructions, for the protection of the privacy of our members.

If during an emergency (or training for that matter) you must send an email or text using Winlink Express, use prudence and do not send anything you would not wanted posted openly on the internet.

UPDATE 5/23: We requested that the Winlink development team at least take measures to limit the availability of the traffic log viewing page on their website to Sysops, or Sysops and registered Winlink users, requiring their login and password to view the page. They assured us they will work on that and hope to achieve that soon. They were not able to provide an estimated date of completion of that.

From an AmRRON Corps radio operator:

The FCC is accepting public comments on RM-11831, which will effectively kill the use of ARQ modes on Amateur bands (this pretty much includes all of the digital modes). The summary from ARSF (Winlink folks) is here:
https://www.winlink.org/content/fcc_petition_rm_11831_threatens_amateur_digital_operations_winlink

Go to this site: <https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filings/express>
Enter the filing number: RM-11831, select from list and hit ENTER
Fill out rest of form, note that ENTER is needed instead of TAB.