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Officials: Virtual Meetings Slow WRC-23 Preparatory Process

Virtual meetings that are required as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are slowing the preparations for the 2013 World Radiocommunication Conference, officials from the FCC, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, and State Department said today, and there were suggestions that the conference should be delayed.

During an online event this afternoon organized by the Federal Communications Bar Association's international telecommunications committee, the officials said that virtual meetings held so far have involved administrative issues rather than substantive ones and they bemoaned the fact that the private diplomacy that can be practiced in person can't translate to virtual settings.

"The virtual meetings are difficult. There's a lot of cues that we normally use missing when we do these virtual meetings. Normally, you're able to read the room, read the pace of the discussions. You're not able to do that in many of these cases," said Charles Glass, chief of the International Spectrum Policy Division in NTIA's Office of Spectrum Management, adding that many of the virtual meetings are essentially teleconferences, not videoconferences.

"There's no diplomacy actually happening during these meetings," he added, noting there is no opportunity to meet privately with counterparts like there is when meetings are held in person.

"I do not know that they will delay the conference because of this," Mr. Glass said. But he said he thinks "that it would be a good thing to at least delay the conference a year at this point, if not more, depending on how long we're away, because you're going to need some in-person diplomacy to catch up on a lot of these issues. We have not gotten a lot of substantive work done at this point. We've gotten a lot of administrative work done up to this point, and we're over a year into this process."

Paul Najarian, a foreign affairs officer in the State Department's Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs who has been working on International Telecommunication Union issues for 35 years, said that all ITU meetings through March 2021 will be held virtually, adding that it is undetermined what will happen after that but that some meetings scheduled through May 2021 will also be held virtually.

Mr. Najarian said also said that ITU staffers have said that when meetings return to in-person events, they want a 30- to-45-day notice.

He added that when in-person meetings are held again, some study groups may compress their work. Another complicating factor is renovations planned for the ITU's headquarters in Geneva in 2022, he

said. That work will force ITU meetings to be held at other sites, which are hard to find, he added. As a result, virtual meetings are likely to continue into 2022 and perhaps beyond, he commented.

“We’re not seeing progress” on meetings discussing studies, Mr. Najarian said, especially on particularly tough agenda items.

However, there is record participation in virtual meetings, he said, noting that a recent five-day meeting had 614 participants.

He added that bilateral discussions are going well because officials are saving time on travel.

Mr. Najarian said that the ITU’s charter requires a WRC to be held between plenipotentiary conferences, meaning the ITU could hold the next WRC between 2023 and 2026.

Dante Ibarra, WRC director for the FCC, said he agreed with the comments of Messrs. Glass and Najarian.

He said the situation has required everyone to adapt and be flexible, adding that the large numbers of U.S. representatives in meetings has led to a challenge of ensuring they are on the same page. He also said diplomacy has been difficult.

Some working parties have had meetings offline between online meetings and have held correspondence groups that have had an “open audience,” he said. —Paul Kirby, paul.kirby@wolterskluwer.com

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