

The World Above 50 MHz

ARRL VUCC and FFMA — Awards for VHF/UHF Grid Chasers

The ARRL VHF/UHF Century Club (VUCC) Award (see Figure 1) was established in 1983. It was created to build on the Central States VHF Society's 1981-era awards system, which followed the International Amateur Radio Union's adoption of the Maidenhead grid locator system in 1980. VUCC offered a simple way for VHF/UHF operators to work one another and earn awards.

The locator system is also used in VHF/UHF contests for multipliers and can help you point your antenna in the right direction. The Maidenhead grid locator system represents any location on Earth using latitude and longitude, expressed as a simple alphanumeric code.

For example, my home station is in the grid square EM12. EM denotes the field, and 12 is the square. Each four-character grid represents a geographical area of one degree of latitude by two degrees of longitude. In the continental US, that area measures approximately 70 × 100 miles.

VUCC Awards

The minimum number of grids for the VUCC Award varies by band, largely based on the difficulty of working long distances on each band. Here are the details for the initial award, followed by the available award endorsements:

- 50 MHz, 144 MHz, and Satellite: 100 grids, with an endorsement sticker for every 25 additional grids
- 222 MHz and 432 MHz: 50 grids, with an endorsement sticker for every 10 additional grids
- 902 MHz and 1296 MHz: 25 grids, with an endorsement sticker for every five additional grids
- 2.3 GHz: 10 grids, with an endorsement sticker for every five additional grids
- 3.4 GHz and above: five grids, with an endorsement sticker for every five additional grids

Awards for 222 and 432 MHz are designated as Half Century because they require 50 grids, and awards for 902 and 1296 MHz are designated as Quarter Century because they require 25 grids. Awards above these are super high frequency. There are no specialty endorsements, such as CW or phone.

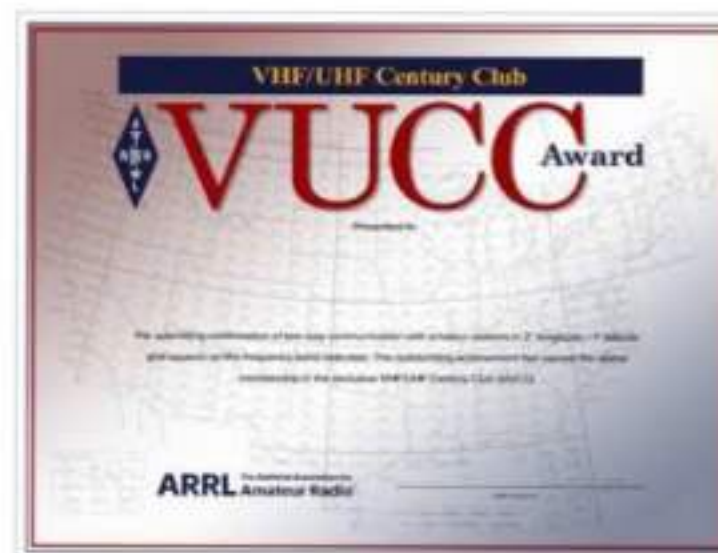


Figure 1 — ARRL VUCC Award certificate.

There are a few rules that address working grid lines and the allowed distance between operating locations. For example, the maximum 200-kilometer range between locations measures the distance between those locations, not a 200-kilometer radius around them. When in doubt, it is always best to consult the ARRL VUCC rules at www.arrl.org/files/file/Awards/VUCC_Rules.pdf.

To use Logbook of The World® (LoTW®) for your VUCC Award, you must configure TQSL with your grid square for each operating location. You'll also need to create a VUCC Award account on LoTW and set the location rules for it.

FFMA Award

The Fred Fish Memorial Award (FFMA) was established by ARRL in 2008 to honor Fred Fish, W5FF (SK), who worked and confirmed all 488 grid squares on 6 meters in the 48 contiguous states. The original award announcement stated:

The FFMA is an "all-or-nothing" award. You must submit confirmation of 2-way contact with all 488 grid squares on 50 MHz in order to qualify. There are no endorsements and no recognized tiers of progression. Any mode may be used. The rules for the award will strictly follow the rules of the ARRL VUCC program.

It's essentially an extension of the ARRL VUCC Award program, but one that is exceedingly difficult to earn. By 2018, 10 years after the award was introduced, only

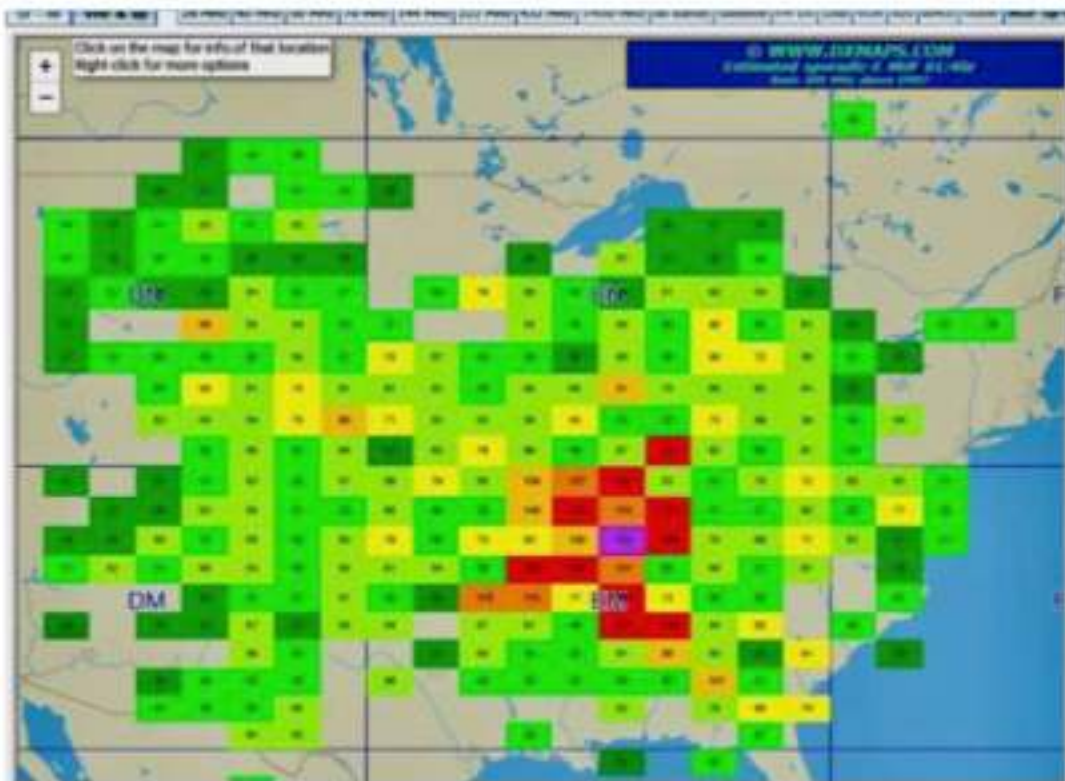


Figure 2 — Real-time sporadic-E clouds and the maximum usable frequency for the evening on June 10, 2026. [www.dxmaps.com]

seven people had earned FFMA. The next year saw two earn the award. Four more were added to the list in 2020, and in 2021, there was a bumper crop of 15. As of this writing, there's a grand total of 63 FFMA holders, with more expected to be awarded this year, thanks in large part to rovers and *WSJT-X*.

FFMA: The Ultimate Grid Chase

So how do you get started on working toward FFMA? First, work all of the 6-meter grids you can. All grids in the US count toward the award, so start with the ones you can hear.

After that, start monitoring DX Maps (www.dxmaps.com) and other online resources to catch sporadic-E openings as they occur (see Figure 2). If you're alert and available, you can significantly expand your list of grids when the band opens.

You should also become familiar with making meteor-scatter contacts using *WSJT-X* MSK144. You can rely on this mode any time of year — particularly during seasonal meteor showers. It can be very helpful when trying to work rovers within about 1,000 miles.

Another mode that is gaining popularity is *WSJT-X* Q65. It's been delivering excellent results among operators when other modes haven't.

Finally, work on improving your ham shack if needed. You can do great things on 6 meters with a vertical or a dipole, but you probably won't achieve FFMA with that setup. So, look at your antenna first.

The good news is that there are several hundred other hams chasing the award, and they are all highly motivated. That means they urge other ham radio operators in rare grids to get on the air, and in grids where

hardly anyone goes, they encourage rovers to activate them.

That's where a great deal of excitement can come into play. Several legendary rovers operate in extremely remote locations using four-wheel drive, vehicles, boats, or lightweight equipment. They may travel thousands of miles, activating multiple rare grids along the way. Some bring large antennas and substantial power.

FFMA Leaderboard and Gridzilla

The FFMA leaderboard has become the go-to resource for tracking your progress toward FFMA and for identifying the most-needed grids within the 488. This is extremely valuable for rovers who need to determine which grids to visit and who needs them. You can find it at <https://groups.io> if you search FFMA. The most-needed list is based on data from contributors to the leaderboard. They are the closest ones to achieving FFMA, so rovers naturally want to help them work those last few grids. Bill, ND0B, started this effort and generally updated it annually. After he earned FFMA #10, he enlisted Francis, KV5W, to run the system. Since Francis earned FFMA #47, Ed, N7PHY, has maintained the listing.

Another helpful online tool is <https://gridzilla.us>. Launched in early 2026 by KV5W, it is intended to eventually replace the FFMA leaderboard. It also tracks all bands from 50 MHz upward.

Though it's a difficult goal to reach, you can start your journey at any time. I'm at 486 FFMA grids, and it may be a while before my last two grids are activated. Even so, it reminds me that it's all about the journey. Consider joining the rest of us FFMA chasers!

Here and There

The sporadic-E season got underway with a rush in early June. The first major opening between Europe and the US East Coast occurred on June 9. The June 10 opening extended into the central US when I picked up 20 new 50 MHz grids, chiefly from Europe and far-eastern Canada. That opening continued into June 11 with sporadic E on 144 MHz, and I picked up a couple of new grids on the East Coast from Texas.

FM and television broadcasts also had a big day. Radio World (www.radioworld.com) reported that William Hepburn in Grimsby, Ontario, Canada, logged KMNE Channel 7 from Bassett, Nebraska, at a center frequency of 177 MHz. The opening didn't appear to reach the 222 MHz band.