The Effects of VSWR on Transmitted Power

No matter how long you have been a ham, sooner of later you will be involved in at least one discussion of something called the Voltage Standing Wave Ratio, or VSWR, of an antenna system. There is a lot of good information available on VSWR as well as a lot of misconceptions about what it is and what it signifies. Probably the most often misconception is that your VSWR should be as close to 1:1 as possible; otherwise "you won't get out very well." A 1:1 VSWR implies a perfect match between all elements of the antenna system. The only problem is that it is possible to have a low VSWR and still have some very serious things wrong with your antenna system. Other misconceptions such as a high VSWR causing television interference, or other unwanted problems are often heard and can cause unnecessary worry. The concept of VSWR is easy to grasp and its importance in an antenna system does not require an engineering degree to understand.

WHY VSWR EXISTS

Early in electronics you learned that to get maximum power into a load required that the load impedance match the generator impedance. Any difference, or mismatching of these impedance would not produce maximum power transfer. This is true of antennas and transmitters as well but, except for handie-talkies, most antennas are not connected directly to a transmitter. The antenna is usually located some distance from the transmitter and requires a feedline to transfer power between the two. If the feedline has no loss, and matches BOTH the transmitter output impedance AND the antenna input impedance, then - and only then - will maximum power be delivered to the antenna. In this case the VSWR will be 1:1 and the voltage and current will be constant over the whole length of the feedline. Any deviation from this situation will cause a "standing wave" of voltage and current to exist on the line.

As the two travelling waves pass each other in opposite directions, they set up an interference pattern called a "standing wave". At certain places on the feedline the voltages will add producing a voltage maximum, and at others their relative phase difference will cause a voltage minimum to exist on the feedline. These maximum and minimum points occur 1/4 wavelength apart. In the days when open-wire feedlines were used these points could easily be measured with simple indicators. Coax cable however presents another problem since the "inside" of the cable is not readily available for measurements. Consequently, VSWR measurements on coax are usually made at the transmitter end of the feedline. Therefore you are presented with the VSWR of the entire system which includes all losses associated with the entire system.

INTERPRETING WHAT YOU HAVE READ

Many VSWR meters are calibrated to read FORWARD power as well as REFLECTED power. They may actually be measuring voltage, and simply have the scales calibrated in power. The important point is to understand what the meter is actually telling you. Assuming for the moment that the VSWR meter contributes no errors, the FORWARD reading is the SUM of the forward power and the reflected power. As a result, it is greater than your actual power output. The REFLECTED power reading is that amount of power which was not initially absorbed by the antenna and has been sent back down the feedline. At the transmitter end it encounters the transmitter output circuitry and is re-reflected back towards the antenna. This happens because you do, in fact, have a VSWR greater than 1:1 as seen by the transmitter. When the re-reflected power encounters the antenna, a portion of it is absorbed and the whole process starts over again.

That value of 1:1 VSWR is guaranteed is to make almost everyone happy, but your antenna system still may not very good. If there is a 3-dB loss down the feedline this means only 1/2 of your output power reaches the antenna, and if your antenna has significant losses, something less than 1/2 of your power will be radiated depending upon how bad the losses really are. If for instance, the loss resistance equals your radiation resistance, the antenna is only 50% efficient meaning only 1/4 of your output power is actually radiated. Yet that reading of 1.67:1 looks fine. A reflection coefficient of p =0.5 means your antenna is not well matched to the feedline. VSWR can be calculated from the reflection coefficient by the following:

VSWR = (1+p)/(1-p)

VSWR AND TRANSMITTED POWER

Let's assume you have an efficient antenna, fed with a low-loss feedline so that the VSWR meter at the transmitter gives you a true reading of 1.65:1. There is no real reason to try to lower it, in fact the same would hold true if the reading were 2:1. Figure 3 is a chart showing the equivalence of VSWR to RETURN LOSS(dB), REFLECTED POWER(%) and TRANSMISSION LOSS(dB). Return loss is related to reflection coefficient by the equation:

Return Loss = -20log$_{10}$(p)

It is just another way of measuring VSWR. For example, with a perfect 1:1 VSWR there would be no reflected power consequently the return loss on the feedline would appear to be infinite. A short or open circuit at the antenna is the worst case scenario since the reflection coefficient would be p =1.0. All incident power would be reflected, and with a lossless feedline the return loss would be 0-dB. This is what the RETURN LOSS (dB) column refers to

The most informative columns in Figure 3 are the REFLECTED POWER(%) and the TRANSMISSION LOSS(dB) columns since they provide an answer to our question of whether further reduction of VSWR is worthwhile. Figure 3 shows that for a VSWR of 1.65:1 the reflected power is only 6.2% of the incident power, and the transmission loss is only 0.27 dB. In more familiar terms, if you count an S-unit as 6 dB, then the 0.27 dB loss is only 1/22 of an S-unit. A reduction of the VSWR to 1.5:1 would provide only a 0.09 dB reduction in transmission loss. This is not worth the effort it would take to achieve such a miniscule increase in power.

Figure 3

VSWR	Return Loss (dB)	Reflected Power (%)	Transmiss. Loss (dB)	VSWR	Return Loss (dB)	Reflected Power (%)	Transmiss. Loss (dB)
1.00	oo	0.000	0.000	1.38	15.9	2.55	0.112
1.01	46.1	0.005	0.0002	1.39	15.7	2.67	0.118
1.02	40.1	0.010	0.0005	1.40	15.55	2.78	0.122
1.03	36.6	0.022	0.0011	1.41	15.38	2.90	0.126
1.04	34.1	0.040	0.0018	1.42	15.2	3.03	0.132
1.05	32.3	0.060	0.0028	1.43	15.03	3.14	0.137
1.06	30.7	0.082	0.0039	1.44	14.88	3.28	0.142
1.07	29.4	0.116	0.0051	1.45	14.7	3.38	0.147
1.08	28.3	0.144	0.0066	1.46	14.6	3.50	0.152
1.09	27.3	0.184	0.0083	1.47	14.45	3.62	0.157

1.10	26.4	0.228	0.0100	1.48	14.3	3.74	0.164
1.11	25.6	0.276	0.0118	1.49	14.16	3.87	0.172
1.12	24.9	0.324	0.0139	1.50	14.0	4.00	0.18
1.13	24.3	0.375	0.0160	1.55	13.3	4.8	0.21
1.14	23.7	0.426	0.0185	1.60	12.6	5.5	0.24
1.15	23.1	0.488	0.0205	1.65	12.2	6.2	0.27
1.16	22.6	0.550	0.0235	1.70	11.7	6.8	0.31
1.17	22.1	0.615	0.0260	1.75	11.3	7.4	0.34
1.18	21.6	0.682	0.0285	1.80	10.9	8.2	0.37
1.19	21.2	0.750	0.0318	1.85	10.5	8.9	0.40
1.20	20.8	0.816	0.0353	1.90	10.2	9.6	0.44
1.21	20.4	0.90	0.0391	1.95	09.8	10.2	0.47
1.22	20.1	0.98	0.0426	2.00	09.5	11.0	0.50
1.23	19.7	1.08	0.0455	2.10	09.0	12.4	0.57
1.24	19.4	1.15	0.049	2.20	08.6	13.8	0.65
1.25	19.1	1.23	0.053	2.30	08.2	15.3	0.73
1.26	18.8	1.34	0.056	2.40	07.7	16.6	0.80
1.27	18.5	1.43	0.060	2.50	07.3	18.0	0.88
1.28	18.2	1.52	0.064	2.60	07.0	19.5	0.95
1.29	17.9	1.62	0.068	2.70	06.7	20.8	1.03
1.30	17.68	1.71	0.073	2.80	06.5	22.3	1.10
1.31	17.4	1.81	0.078	2.90	06.2	23.7	1.17
1.32	17.2	1.91	0.083	3.00	06.0	24.9	1.25
1.33	17.0	2.02	0.087	3.50	05.1	31.0	1.61
1.34	16.8	2.13	0.092	4.00	04.4	36.0	1.93
1.35	16.53	2.23	0.096	4.50	03.9	40.6	2.27
1.36	16.3	2.33	0.101	5.00	03.5	44.4	2.56
1.37	16.1	2.44	0.106	6.00	02.9	50.8	3.08
Source: http://www.aralb.org/Commitees/SPECIAL_PROJECTS/vswr.htm							

Further examination of the chart shows that a VSWR of 2.6:1 results in only about 1 dB of transmission loss. A high VSWR of 6:1 shows just a 3 dB transmission loss, but this is 1/2 an S-unit. You will still be getting out but this is becoming a significant loss. Your feedline will be dissipating more power than it should, and there may be other serious things wrong with your antenna system.