

RECREATIONAL BOATING COMMUNICATIONS

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DIGITAL SELECTIVE CALLING (DSC)

Digital Selective Calling (DSC) is a feature of some VHF radios that provides a digital distress signal upon activation. During a distress alert DSC provides the boat's identification, nature of distress and its exact position when connected to a GPS. It also provides an excellent means of making a routine person to person call to another DSC equipped boater through the use of the individual's 9-digit Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI) number. A valid MMSI can be obtained from the Federal Communications Commission, Boat U.S. and Sea Tow.

The Coast Guard also maintains a voice guard on VHF channel 16 and 2182 kHz.

TESTING YOUR VHF DSC RADIO

Exchange routine calls on VHF channel 70 with another suitably equipped vessel. Remember, however, that it is illegal for any boater to send a false distress to test their radio.

RESPONDING TO A DISTRESS ALERT

If you receive a DSC distress alert, do not answer immediately. Allow a USCG station to contact the distressed vessel.

If no contact is heard, call the distressed vessel on VHF channel 16. Once you have made contact, call the USCG on VHF channel 16, or by any available means, and tell them you are relaying a distress call. Give them the vessel's position, description, the number of people aboard, and nature of the distress.

MARITIME SAFETY INFORMATION (MSI)

NAVTEX is an international automated medium frequency (518 kHz) direct-printing service operated by the U.S. Coast Guard. It delivers navigational and meteorological warnings and forecasts, as well as urgent marine safety information to ships. It was created to provide a simple, low-cost, automated means of receiving this information from up to 200 nautical miles offshore.

There are no user fees associated with receiving NAVTEX broadcasts. All that's required is a NAVTEX receiver to get all this useful information coming directly to your boat.

The NOAA weather radio network provides VHF voice broadcasts of local and coastal marine forecasts on a continuous cycle.

SATELLITE EPIRBs

Currently there are two types of Electronic Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB) units, each operating on different frequencies. When activated, EPIRBs emit automated distress signals to search and rescue authorities and can – if combined with a GPS unit – provide precise vessel location and identification.

The newer 406 MHz EPIRBs are more reliable and available with integral GPS units. The older 121.5 MHz units have a homing beacon that USCG aircraft can home in on, but they are not GPS capable and are therefore more difficult to track. 121.5 MHz units will be decommissioned in February 2009.

Although the USCG recommends that boaters purchase 406 MHz EPIRBs with integral GPS, either type is an important safety device for boaters to have, particularly when offshore and out of VHF radio range. Numerous sources for rental or purchase of EPIRBs are available online.

CELLULAR PHONES ARE NOT RECOMMENDED

Cellular phones, in general, do not provide adequate ship-to-ship communication or reliable communication with rescue vessels. Besides, only the recipient of a cellular phone distress call can hear a boater's call for assistance, which means that other boaters in the caller's immediate vicinity will be unaware of the request for assistance. Accurately locating a cellular caller is also difficult. If the caller does not know precisely where he/she is, the Coast Guard will have difficulty finding the boat's location on the water. Therefore, both the Coast Guard and Sea Tow urge boaters to use their DSC VHF radio instead.

