

The GMDSS Task Force

I am writing to you, and to other organizations interested in maritime safety, to seek your support of our Small Vessel Radio Safety Initiative as requested by the Task Force members at a recent meeting. The Task Force for Implementation of the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) is sponsored by the Coast Guard and addresses all aspects of the use of radio systems to enhance safety at sea. The Task Force has been actively involved in GMDSS advocacy for many years and its membership includes over 2300 government and private sector representatives. See also our website at www.navcen.uscg.gov/marcomms (click on GMDSS, then Task Force).

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) created the GMDSS primarily to enhance the safety of high seas shipping over 300 tons. The Task Force is very appreciative of the success of GMDSS over the past ten years but feels that there are important safety benefits for smaller craft through use of selected GMDSS systems. There are only a few hundred large ships flying the U.S. flag but there are literally millions of primarily recreational vessels which are largely unregulated and which account for the vast majority of Coast Guard and Vessel Assist rescue cases.

The Task Force has strongly endorsed a Hawaiian Law which requires that all vessels going more than a mile offshore must carry a marine VHF radio or a Satellite Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB), the latter having been interpreted to include the option of a similar Personal Locator Beacon (PLB). The National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) has also endorsed the program and developed a model Act which is recommended for adoption by other coastal states. The Task Force recommended that the Coast Guard issue a uniform national regulation based on the NASBLA Model Act but was advised that it would first be necessary to conduct a supporting statistical analysis and seek legislative authority covering recreational boats.

An Act pending in Congress, Sec. 21 of HR 2652 (Marine Safety Act of 2009) would, if enacted, remove the Coast Guard's statutory limitation on requiring EPIRBs on recreational boats. If the Coast Guard should propose EPIRBs/PLBs regulations for recreational boats, it would most likely apply to boats more than three miles offshore, since this is the distance which applies for almost all commercial vessels in the U.S. It is worth noting that most of these commercial vessels also carry VHF radios.

Under the circumstances, it appears that any uniform national requirement is probably years away but in the meantime, a strong recommendation to the maritime community from the Task Force and other maritime organizations for voluntary adherence by all vessels going three miles or more offshore would make a significant contribution to maritime safety. The continuing reduction in cost of VHF portables and PLBs puts the objective within reach of the average boat operator as does the availability of rental equipment for short term use. It is the opinion of the Task Force that experienced boat operators recognize the need to carry at least minimal radio equipment when operating offshore but a strong recommendation from our maritime organizations would help to protect novice operators.

The support of your organization by joining the Task Force in recommending that all vessels going a mile or more offshore, voluntarily carry either a marine VHF radio or an EPIRB or PLB, would be very helpful. We would also invite you to publicize the recommendation through your Press Releases and Newsletters. I would appreciate being advised as to whether your organization will support our Small Vessel Radio Safety Initiative and any suggestions you may have for encouraging the maritime public to adopt these recommendations voluntarily.

Sincerely,

JACK FUECHSEL

Copy to: Ralph Sponar