National Marine Electronics Association

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For Immediate Release

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NMEA pushes new specs and education to save lives at sea

Coast Guard says most distress calls
lack position and other data for rescues

SEVERNA PARK, MD—In response to a request by the U.S. Coast Guard, the National Marine Electronics Association (NMEA) is working toward a solution aimed at saving lives at sea. The goal is to ensure that radio distress signals sent by mariners contain GPS information that will enable search and rescue (SAR) teams to locate vessels quickly and efficiently.

Modern fixed-mount VHF radios are required to be equipped with Digital Selective Calling (DSC). At the push of a button, the DSC function transmits data to all other DSC-equipped radios within range and to SAR authorities, such as the Coast Guard. Those data include a unique number assigned to the radio called a Maritime Mobile Service Identity, or MMSI. A vessel's MMSI provides the boat's name, home port, and owner. DSC-equipped radios also have a terminal that allows the owner to connect the unit to an onboard GPS. The problem is that boat owners often neglect to connect their DSC VHF with the GPS and many times do not register their MMSI.

In a February 23 letter, Rear Admiral R.E. Day explained to NMEA President David Hayden that "Of the roughly 100 digital selective calling distress alerts we are now receiving each month, approximately nine out of 10 do not have position information (i.e. do not have a GPS navigation receiver interconnected to their DSC-equipped VHF radio), and approximately six out of 10 have not registered their Maritime Mobile Service Identity. Despite the promises DSC technology offers in significantly reducing the alerting and search time for mariners in distress, there's little a Coast Guard watchstander can do after receiving a distress alert with no position information, using an unregistered MMSI, and having no follow-up voice communications."

Admiral Day said that both the MMSI registration problem and VHF/GPS interconnect issue can be addressed through public outreach, but he stressed that the "interconnect problem cannot be resolved absent a technological solution."

“NMEA will do everything we can to help solve these issues, as part of our continuing joint effort with the Coast Guard and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to improve safety at sea,” said Hayden. “The NMEA 0183 Standard Committee is already working on new specifications, and we will encourage our manufacturer and dealer members to educate the boating consumers about the need to link their DSC radios with a GPS and to register their MMSI numbers. But, at the end of the day, we can only recommend that boaters take these actions—we can’t mandate them. That job should be a collaborative effort between the Coast Guard and the FCC.”

Founded in 1957, the NMEA has led the way in establishing technical standards for data exchange in marine electronics, with the widely accepted NMEA 0183 data protocol, NMEA 2000®, and certification standards for marine electronics technicians. NMEA standards and programs focus on ensuring that the boating consumer is provided with reliable products and professional service. For more information, visit the NMEA website at www.NMEA.org or call (410) 975-9425.