

U.S. Department of
Homeland Security
United States
Coast Guard



Date: April 28, 2008

Coast Guard urges mariners to use new distress beacons

BOSTON - As temperatures rise and the number of boaters in New England waters increases, the Coast Guard is reminding mariners to make the switch to new life-saving digital Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons before the clock runs out on older non-digital equipment.

Beginning Feb. 1, 2009, the Coast Guard and other search and rescue personnel will only monitor mayday calls that are broadcast using digital 406MHz EPIRB beacons. Older 121.5 MHz EPIRB distress signals will no longer be detected or sent directly to search and rescue personnel.

EPIRBs are activated in situations when lives are at risk and transmit distress signals via satellite to search and rescue personnel worldwide. Signals from digital 406 MHz beacons can be relayed to rescue personnel within minutes and with more reliability and accuracy than the 121.5 models.

"By far, the biggest advantage of the 406 EPIRB is its position accuracy," said Chief Petty Officer Jose Da Silva, a search and rescue coordinator in the Coast Guard First District Command Center. "A 121.5 mega hertz beacon could be anywhere within a 435 square mile radius of the position it sends out, but a 406 mega hertz EPIRB should be within a 25 mile radius. It gives us a much smaller search area."

Additionally, 406 MHz EPIRB owners are required by law to provide contact and emergency contact information and vessel identifying characteristics by registering their beacons with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The free registration allows responders to quickly confirm that the distress is real, who they are looking for and where they should look. It also means that accidental activation of an EPIRB may be resolved quickly with a phone call to the owner, saving resources for actual distress alerts.

When disposing of a 121.5 MHz EPIRB or taking it out of regular use, the battery should be disconnected or removed and properly disposed to avoid accidental activation. Owners of these devices should also ensure the registration database is updated with the EPIRB's inactive status.

In the U.S., users are required by law to directly register their beacon in the U.S. 406 MHz Beacon Registration Database at: <http://www.beaconregistration.noaa.gov/> or by calling 1-888-212-SAVE. Other users can register their beacon in their country's national beacon registration database or, if no national database is available, in the International Beacon Registration Database at <https://www.406registration.com/>.