



[Coast Guard could require pleasure boats to carry emergency beacons](#)

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Boaters may not realize that deep within the U.S. Coast Guard 2011 authorization bill is a paragraph allowing the agency to require that pleasure boats have emergency beacons when travelling offshore.

What does “offshore” mean? The Coast Guard defines it as three nautical miles or more from the U.S. coastline or from the shores of the Great Lakes.

The requirement (found in Section 618 of the authorization) could be a life-saving one. Why? Because when the perfectly calm skies that you left home under turn into a snarling beast, your skill won’t always be enough to get you home.

And sometimes your boat itself may be what betrays you as she threatens to slip away beneath you. You are going to be hard to find — unless you are sending a signal to a satellite that will in turn notify the Coast Guard.

To be clear, the bill, signed by President Obama in October, doesn’t mean that boaters going offshore must have emergency beacons; it simply authorizes the Coast Guard to require the beacons if it believes they are warranted.

I’ve previously written about [various locator devices](#) and how they are changing. The main contender is the Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB), but the business of

search and rescue keeps evolving. Among the evolutionary devices that have emerged is the PPIRB, a Personal EPIRB that is typically referred to as a Personal Locator Beacon, or PLB. The device is worn on your person and like the more modern EPIRBs, has a built-in GPS.

The state of the art

Interestingly, while the USCG mandated a couple of years ago against using the old 121.5MHZ frequency for emergency notification in favor of the far superior 406MHZ frequency, the former frequency is favored for close-in radio direction-finding.

So the newest EPIRBs now transmit simultaneously on 406MHZ and 121.5MHZ. The 406MHZ reduces the footprint to 1 square nautical mile (from the previous 12 square nautical miles). It is also heard by satellites all over the world, meaning that within an hour, a USCG regional control center will have initiated aid to you.

And the rescuers will also be looking for your EPIRB's 121.5MHZ signal with their radio gear. In heavy seas, that may very well be the difference between passing right by you while you are in a trough — or knowing that you are just over the next wave.

But my boat has an EPIRB – do I need a PLB too?

Good! I just hope you don't fall off the boat ... Or that your EPIRB battery, which you dutifully replaced by shipping it to the cheapest battery replacement company you could find online, doesn't fail at the time you need it most — as you grab it in an abandon ship scenario. In that case, redundancy will look very cheap and very smart.

Plus, PLBs fit in your pocket and cost considerably less than EPIRBs.

Cobbled-together EPIRB?

In a recent advisory, the Coast Guard noted that it would exempt from the requirement vessels equipped with a GPS-enabled VHF radio, provided the vessels stayed within 20 nautical miles of shore.

What is a "GPS-enabled VHF radio?" Ever notice that VHF radios have come with a red button for a number of years now? When pressed, that button sends your nine-digit Maritime Mobile Service Identity number (which is free and refers solely to you and your boat) – and if it is hooked up to your GPS, your location, to all radios equipped with Digital Selective Calling within line of sight, including the Coast Guard.

Essentially, your GPS and DSC radio can be combined to become an EPIRB or PLB. In fact, such a configuration gives you 17 nautical miles more leeway than if had an EPIRB or a PLB. Go figure.

This post is courtesy of [Capt. Vincent Pica](#), chief of staff for the First District, Southern Region, United States Coast Guard Auxiliary.

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the D1SR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you “get in this thing...”