



Safety Thursday Series Issue 1

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VHF Radios with Digital Selective Calling - An important safety tool

The Mac Safety Regulations (MSRs) require all boats to carry a permanently installed VHF Radio, as well as a handheld. These radios are critical safety devices, allowing boats to call for help when needed.

All fixed-mount VHF radios sold after 1998 are required to have Digital Selective Calling (DSC) capability. As part of the Coast Guard's Rescue 21 system, properly installed and registered DSC-VHF radios allow a boat in distress to instantly transmit via a single button a "mayday" digital distress call to all VHF radios in range. This distress message can contain the identity of the ship in distress as well as its location, as long as the radio is properly installed and registered. All commercial shipping monitors these calls, in addition to the USCG. This is the best, fastest way to summon help in most circumstances.

Take the time to ensure that your boat's DSC radio is set up correctly.

Installation

In order to be most effective, a VHF radio with DSC must be connected to a GPS receiver. Some newer radios have an integral GPS, but most require wiring to the boat's GPS or electronic system (chart plotter). This allows the unit to transmit via the emergency key the current location of the boat as well as a distress signal. A DSC radio that is not connected to the GPS unit will still transmit a distress signal, but without location, key time is lost while rescuers search for you. Connecting the GPS to the radio is usually fairly straight-forward - consult your VHF manual or a marine electronics technician for help.

Registration

In addition to being properly installed, VHF-DSC radios need to be properly registered. To do this, you need to obtain an MMSI (Maritime Mobile Service Identity) identity number. This MMSI number is permanently associated with the boat and can be obtained for free for US-registered boats from BoatUS:

<http://www.boatus.com/mmsi/>

If you have already obtained your MMSI number, take 5 minutes now to verify that the information listed is correct for your boat, such as contact information, boat name and description, and emergency contact person.

The MMSI number acts like a phone number for your boat. It identifies your boat when a distress signal is activated. Additionally, it allows you to have an individual radio conversations with specific boats via dialing their MMSI number.

Once you obtain your MMSI number for free, you need to program it into the radio. Follow the instructions in your manual.

The Mac Committee is requesting that all boats with DSC-capable radios obtain an MMSI number and then provide it to the Committee. Skippers - please update your record to add your MMSI number via the "competitor login" on the Mac web site. This would enable us to contact an individual boat if required via VHF-DSC and also serves as a database for the USCG in the event of a distress.

Please take the time this boating season to make sure your VHF-DSC radio is properly connected to a functioning GPS. Make sure you have obtained an MMSI number and programmed it into your radio.

As always, if you have any questions, please contact our Race Coordinator at racecoordinator@chicagoyachtclub.org

Note: The purpose of this article is to highlight some of the Mac Safety Regulations and how your crew can race the Mac as safely as possible. As always, ultimate responsibility for the safety of the crew and the decision whether to race or to stop racing is that of the skipper (RRS4, MSR2). This email is meant as a courtesy only and you should always refer to the Race Documents section of the website for the Notice of Race, Sailing Instructions and Mac Safety Regulations, which govern the race.