

UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

MEDIA ADVISORY

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STEPS BEGIN TO DISCONTINUE THE USE OF 121.5 AND 243 MHz FOR SATELLITE DISTRESS ALERTS

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The International Cospas-Sarsat Program announced, it will terminate satellite processing of distress signals from 121.5 and 243 MHz emergency beacons. Although the use of emergency beacons activating on these frequencies is not under the purview of the Cospas-Sarsat Program, mariners, aviators and other persons will have to switch to emergency beacons operating at 406 MHz in order to be detected by satellites.

The Cospas-Sarsat Program is currently working on the details, including the time frame, of the termination of 121.5 and 243 MHz satellite alerting services. While no effective date has been set yet for this action, it is expected to occur far enough into the future to avoid a crisis situation for persons now using these beacons.

Cospas-Sarsat operates a satellite constellation that relays distress alerts to search and rescue authorities through a worldwide ground communications network. The appropriate search and rescue agencies then respond to provide assistance. The beacons used include emergency locator transmitters (ELTs) in aircraft, emergency position-indicating radio beacons (EPIRBs) carried onboard vessels, and personal locator beacons (PLBs) used by individuals. Aviators, mariners and other persons around the globe use these beacons, although there has been no regulatory provision for use of PLBs yet in the United States.

Influencing Cospas-Sarsat Program's decision is guidance from the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). These two specialized agencies of the United Nations are responsible for regulating the safety of ships and aircraft, respectively, on international transits, and handle international standards and plans for maritime and aeronautical search and rescue. Over 180 nations are members of IMO and ICAO.

121.5 MHz false alerts inundate search and rescue authorities. This is another major factor in influencing the decision to stop the satellite processing. False alerts adversely impact the effectiveness of lifesaving services. While the 406 MHz beacons cost more, they provide search and rescue agencies with the more reliable and complete information they need to do their job more efficiently and effectively.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, along with the United States Coast Guard, United States Air Force and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, are responsible for implementing the Cospas-Sarsat Program at the national level.

The United States Coast Guard is the lead agency for coordinating national search and rescue policy and is responsible for providing search and rescue services on, under and over assigned international waters and waters subject to United States jurisdiction.

The implication of this Cospas-Sarsat decision is that users of beacons that send distress alerts on 121.5 and 243 MHz should eventually switch to beacons operating on 406 MHz if they want the alerts to be detected and relayed via satellites. Meanwhile, anyone planning to buy a new distress beacon needs to be aware and take the Cospas-Sarsat decision into account.

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