GMDSS TASK FORCE

Newsletter and Summary Record of 8 January 2026 Meeting

1. The Task Force Meeting. This Newsletter reports on the recent meeting of the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) Task Force sponsored by the U.S. Coast Guard and the Radio Technical Commission for Maritime Services (RTCM) and held virtually on 8 January 2026. The Task Force is dedicated to monitoring the success and shortcomings of the GMDSS. The Task Force is also active in current efforts to modernize the GMDSS and monitors related developments in maritime radio and electronic navigation (e-navigation). The Task Force advocates voluntary use of radio safety equipment by all vessels and makes recommendations to government authorities to improve safety at sea regulations.

2. Task Force membership. Membership is open to individuals associated with commercial vessel operations, recreational vessel interests, training institutions, service agents, manufacturers, government authorities and any interested person or organization, and there is no fee for participation. New members are welcome; to join, send your name, organization (if any), email address, and telephone number (optional) to the Director, Bill Cairns, at gmdsstf@rtcm.org. Members who are unable to attend Task Force meetings are invited to participate by email correspondence and to connect with Task Force meetings by conference call or virtual meeting platform. This Newsletter goes out to over 6000 members after each meeting. The Task Force also maintains a website at https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/task-force-background.

3. The Summary Record. This record of the meeting is provided for information and will be posted on the Task Force portion of the Coast Guard NAVCEN web site and the RTCM web site. The GMDSS Task Force held a virtual meeting on 8 Jan 2026. The meeting was attended by 45 members through Microsoft Teams, or by phone.

4. Distribution of Information Papers:

a. The following Papers of interest were displayed and are available to all on the website: https://www.joecel.com/GMDSSTaskForce

i. RTCM Comment FCC Delete_Gen_Docket_25-133
ii. FCC Delete FR 2025-22633 – [subsequent to the meeting in the final rule FCC rescinded the Part 80 (maritime) deletions under their Delete Delete proceeding requested in RTCM's FCC filing. All requested retentions were accepted.]
iii. ICAO-IMO JWG-SAR-31-WP.11 - Radar SART detection
iv. ICAO-IMO JWG-SAR-32-11-Rev.1 - Report of Meeting
v. MMSI Working Group Summary Record 17 December 2025
vi. NAVAREA Reddit photo
vii. Report of IMO-ITU EG 21
viii. Task Force agenda 115

5. Recreational Vessel Group: Gene Danko from the US Power Squadron leads the Recreational Vessel Task Group. He noted that SeaTow was no longer issuing MMSIs and that USPS had assumed that role and had successfully entered USPS MMSIs into the USCG MISLE,

ensuring continuity and updated records. SeaTow will issue a notice to its 27,000 customers about the responsibility shift, followed by the Power Squadron sending welcome letters in batches to integrate users and manage help desk requirements. Joe Hersey confirmed that previously invisible or outdated SeaTow MMSI registrations are now updated and visible to the Coast Guard, resolving a longstanding issue and improving the accuracy of the MMSI database.

a. Report of the National Boating Safety Advisory Committee: Brian Moore updated the group on the status of the National Safe Boating Advisory Committee, noting delays in the name of the future reconstituted advisory committee, member approval and the absence of a meeting date. Brian Moore reported that the National Safe Boating Advisory Committee is awaiting DHS (S1) signature before moving to presidential approval, with no meeting date set.

6. Commercial Vessel Task Group: Captain Bob Zales (Southeast Fisheries Association) described ongoing efforts by the commercial fishing and passenger vessel industries to have Starlink and similar satellite web-based systems approved by the FCC and Coast Guard as compliant communication devices. He emphasized the widespread use and reliability of Starlink, the need for regulatory modernization, and the support from national fishery management councils. Ed Thiedeman explained that RTCM Standard 128.00.0 is being updated to include new satellite communication technologies such as Starlink and Iridium. The update is about halfway complete, with engagement from satellite service providers, and aims to address current and future technologies, including 5G and 6G satellite networks. Participants discussed technical requirements for Starlink use on vessels, including power supply considerations (e.g., the need for inverters), the need for a vessel-assigned cell device for reliable contact, and the importance of ensuring two-way communication for both distress and routine operations. The need for a broadcast function to alert nearby vessels was also highlighted. Concerns were raised about the ability to hail vessels directly, the registration of communication devices to vessels, and the need for Starlink to provide service availability data. Edwin Thiedeman invited interested parties to participate in the RTCM SC128 meetings, and contact information was exchanged to facilitate further collaboration.

7. Service Agents and Manufacturers Task Group: Nothing new to report.

8. Training Task Group: Group chair Kurt Anderson from MITAGS was unable to participate. Russ Levin, Gordon West, Eric Weber, and others discussed the outdated nature of GMDSS training elements and examinations, ongoing efforts to update content, and the need for collaboration to ensure relevance to modern technologies. Russell Levin and Eric Weber noted that elements 3 and 8 of the GMDSS examination are significantly outdated, lacking references to modern solid-state radars and containing obsolete radio theory. Element 9 is controlled externally and offers limited flexibility. Gordon West and Russ Levin are collaborating with Kurt Anderson to identify and update areas in the examination content, with Russ Levin having already made progress on element 8. The aim is to ensure applicants study current marine communications practices.

9. Coast Guard Reports: USCG provided updates on IMO, ITU, and IEC activities, including the approval of VDES as an AIS substitute, State Department involvement in IMO,

and ongoing work on standards for digital voice, VHF channels, and autonomous vessel identification.:

a. Updates on IMO NCSR/MSC meetings: Patrick Gallagher outlined Coast Guard preparation for the May meeting of the Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) and the June meeting of the Navigation, Communications, and Search and Rescue (NCSR) Subcommittee, including the development of papers on non-geosynchronous satellites and coordination with the International Telecommunications Union. Patrick Gallagher noted increased State Department oversight in IMO activities, requiring extended review periods for documents and reducing the number of US participants in expert groups.

b. Joint IMO/ITU Experts Group: Patrick Gallagher noted that the Experts Group is looking into the digitalization of the VHF band. One of the big topics the EG is working on is the IMO positions for the next World Radio Conference. The upcoming EG is basically the next to last chance to make an impact before IMO will have to send in its positions to the ITU for WRC.

c. ICAO/IMO Joint Working Group: Dave Edwards summarized the outcomes of the ICAO/IMO Joint Working Group, including positions on autonomous vessels, radar SART performance, autonomous distress tracking, and the review of search and rescue manual appendices. The Joint Working Group is addressing technical and operational challenges in search and rescue coordination.

d. NAVTEX outages: Patrick Gallagher reported continued NAVTEX outages due to aging infrastructure, with efforts underway to explore alternative methods such as satellite-only dissemination, as practiced in Australia. Joseph Hersey highlighted additional problems, including broadcasts exceeding time slots and cross-coast interference. Volunteers are sought to monitor NAVTEX performance and report issues. Eric Weber advocated retaining MF-based NAVTEX as a backup to satellite systems, emphasizing the need for budget allocation to maintain the system and reduce reliance on satellites.

e. ITU-R WP5B Update: Johnny Schultz provided updates on significant WP5B work, including revisions to AIS, VDES, MMSI, and related recommendations, as well as ongoing efforts to address technical challenges such as VHF voice blocking and radar SART performance. Johnny Schultz reported the successful completion of major revisions to ITU Recommendation 1371 (AIS), including the removal of frequency agility requirements and updates to MMSI coding. The VDES recommendation (2092) was also revised and adopted, supporting ongoing IEC equipment standard development. Updates to Recommendation 585 clarified beacon coding and expanded free-form numbering to address resource shortages and duplicate MMSIs. Work continues on related recommendations and reports.

f. Four Digit Numbering of VHF Channels: Joe Hersey addressed Four Digit Numbering of VHF Channels. Although 4-digits are already here, the reason this is on the agenda is due to the loss of the old VHF public correspondence channels effective 1 January 2030. Those are channels 24, 25, 26, 84, 85, and 86. It doesn't affect the US so much, but it does affect Canada and VTS operations in Canada as Glenn Coady raised at our last meeting. Glenn Coady noted that Canada had created a ship safety bulletin and it's been issued and they are in the process of updating some of their associated documentation for the mariner. It is likely that these channels will start to disappear from new radios. For GMDSS radios, that's already begun and SOLAS ships are required to have updated radios by 2028. There is not yet any regulatory action by the FCC to take those channels away.

g. VHF-FM voice blocking AIS on own ship and close by: Joseph Hersey and Ross Norsworthy discussed the persistent problem of VHF voice transmissions blocking AIS and VDES signals, particularly in port areas. Efforts to update standards have faced resistance, but the issue remains on the agenda for further action at IEC.

h. Status of Class D DSC Radios: RTCM has completed its work on the Class D DSC standard, which has been handed off to IEC Joe Hersey reported that IEC has been working to update their IEC 62238 Class D standard, which is about 20 years old, badly out of date, and not aligned with ITU. The big change will be the requirement for an integral GNSS receiver, so the longstanding problem of distress alerts having no position should eventually go away.

i. Radar SART Performance: Participants reviewed ongoing work to improve radar SART detection, including updates to ITU and IEC standards. Challenges include operator training, technical limitations of modern radars, and the debate over transitioning to AIS SARTs. The group agreed to keep the topic active for further development.

j. AIS Mobile ATON: Joe Hersey noted that RTCM has a committee to develop an AIS Mobile ATON standard. It completed its work last year using message 21, which is the AIS Mobile ATON message and an application specific message 25 to handle a single slot mobile ATON. Since then, ITU M1371 was updated with a new message 28, which is a single slot AIS ATON message. RTCM reopened up its standard to accommodate the work of ITU and had a meeting in December to amend the standard, make the necessary changes and prepare the standard for voting. However, the Coast Guard asked to readdress and reopen the standard for a number of items essentially bringing work to a halt. SC121 is working internally with the Coast Guard to plan the next steps. We had our meeting with ETSI TC ERM TG Marine present. They sent SC121 a liaison statement on AMRD Group B, which is designed for fishnet and other types of non-safety markers using VHF channel 2006, 160.9 megahertz, which is noted in Appendix 18 of the radio regulations. However, in the U.S., it is used by the railroad community. Because of use by the railroads, some regulatory changes will be needed. This is the international answer for fishnet markers. FCC has an open proceeding on AIS fishnet markers.

k. Interpreting USCG uninspected fishing vessel carriage requirements: Note the discussion under item 3, Commercial Vessel Group regarding Starlink use.

l. Transition of SARSAT Program from NOAA to Coast Guard: The Coast Guard officially assumed leadership of the SARSAT program from NOAA as of October 1, 2025, with NOAA continuing to operate the ground system and beacon registration database under interagency agreements. NASA's technical expertise is also leveraged. Edwin Thiedeman recommended Lane Carter and Palestine Fox as future points of contact for the SARSAT program, with plans to invite them to subsequent meetings.

m. Recommendation to IMO MSC that all mariners carry PLBs: The United States submitted an INF paper to NCSR 12 addressing MSLD's, which includes PLB's with AIS. It discussed different types of devices that mariners could use for personal locating notification. The intent was to write a working paper for NCSR 13 to raise the discussion of voluntary carriage of these types of devices and how IMO should integrate them into MSLDS. There was a concern raised by some RCCs from other countries regarding unlocated DSC alerts being generated by MSLDS and apparently caused by being inappropriately tested. MSLDs are being turned on and waiting for transmission and then being turned off. The DSC transmission occurs rather rapidly before the GNSS can locate itself and fill in the location information. The Coast Guard does not believe that changing the standard will address the issue other than in inserting a delay from when the DSC is transmitted, which defeats the immediate transmission requirement.

USCG will continue to monitor the situation and work with RCCs worldwide and collect information on that and take action as appropriate.

n. MSLDs: The Coast Guard submitted a paper to NCSR 12 on maritime survivor locating devices (MSLDs), including PLBs with AIS. The intent is to encourage voluntary carriage and discuss integration into the GMDSS, with ongoing monitoring of false alert issues and updates to standards as needed. Canada is updating its standards to allow hybrid closed/open loop operation for MSLDs to reduce false alerts, and output power requirements are being aligned with international recommendations. ETSI may propose changes to ITU recommendations to address closed loop system limitations.

o. Aqua Alert Bill in Congress for Relaying MSI Alerts to Cell Phones That Register for the Voluntary Service: The Coast Guard has begun a pilot program to implement the Aqua Alert service. They have completed installations and are operating at the sectors in Long Island Sound and Eastern Great Lakes. They have completed the majority of the prep work for sector Los Angeles/Long Beach and anticipate LA/LB will be online sometime in Jan 2026. In LALB beginning this month, the intent is to run those services for this next boating season and the following boating season, then analyze the results of the usage. Based on that, they will prepare a follow-up report to Congress with any recommendations. One item to note is this uses existing FEMA emergency notification services, such as the Amber Alert and Silver Alert. It is the same infrastructure that's used for those, which allows USCG to do things much more rapidly and at a low cost. They need to ensure adequate licensing and then enact agreements with the local telecommunication service providers. With new generation phones, they can do a geographic routing, where they can pick a point and radius for those to receive this notification. With older phones, it is based on the cellular towers that are selected.

10. MMSI WG and related issues: Joe Hersey noted that the MMSI WG had been held on 17 December 2025. The following are being considered by this group:

a. MMSI Management: Registered MMSI data are being accepted by USCG MISLE (Marine Information for Safety and Law Enforcement) at least on a weekly basis. Federal MMSIs have been provided to the USCG by NTIA by spreadsheet, but that data has not been added into MISLE. USCG MMSIs are also not being updated in MISLE.

b. MMSI reset: The RTCM MMSI reset standard was adopted and published in November 2025 and will be footnoted in the new Class D DSC standard. Hopefully this will obviate the problem of bad MMSIs. That also applies to Class B AIS.

c. US Power Squadrons assuming Sea Tow-registered MMSIs: As noted by Gene Danko under item 5 Recreational Vessel Group, USPS has actively assumed MMSI registered data and successfully entering the information into USCG MISLE database.

d. Registering MMSIs used by autonomous vessels: The WG is addressing how to identify autonomous vessels in the MMSI Database for licensed by rule vessels. FCC had sent out a notice on that, and they are asking that autonomous vessels be separately identified and asked the providers to do that. A meeting has been set up for next week with the providers to figure out how to identify autonomous vessels by MMSI.

11. Satellite systems: Mark Lawson and Ed Thiedeman provided updates on Iridium's network availability, onboarding of maritime safety information providers, new terminal launches, and the status of other satellite constellations supporting search and rescue. Mark Lawson reported that Iridium maintained 99.9% network availability in 2025, onboarded most maritime safety

information providers, and launched the Certus GMDSS platform, which integrates GMDSS, security, and internet services in a single terminal. Iridium has initiated a working group to plan a new satellite constellation targeted for launch around 2035, exploring advanced technologies such as VHF laser links. Ed Thiedeman noted the retirement of U.S. LEO satellites, the operational status of UMETSAT and Russian satellites, and the robustness of the MEOSAR system with full Galileo and GPS constellations. GEO satellites provide global coverage except for polar regions.

12. **FCC Reports**: Katie Knox noted the FCC's direct to final rule for the "delete, delete, delete" proceeding. and thanked everybody that submitted comments. The direct to final rule was released on October 29th, 2025. That rulemaking was published in the Federal Register on 12 December 2025, and the comment period deadline was 2 January 2026. Because that period has closed, FCC was unable to further discuss the rulemaking for ex parte reasons.

13. Reports from other Governmental and International Agencies:

a. NOAA/National Weather Service: Darin Figurskey from the Ocean Prediction Center noted that on the Pacific side, for years they have had a lot of overlap from Met Area 12 into other Met Areas and tried to reduce that overlap and direct that high seas forecast specifically to Met Area 12. All the feedback was positive, and they intend to implement, however the implementation date is not yet determined. NWS is looking to make weather products more graphical and reduce the scope of alphanumeric product. NWS reported out before the HF VOBRA that was discontinued 1 Jan 2026 went to comment on that according to the Coast Guard there. NAVTEX continues and offshore forecasts continue, both of which overlap that VOBRA.

b. Committee on the Marine Transportation System: No report available.

c. National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA): No report available.

d. NTSB: Marcel Muise from NTSB, Joseph Hersey, and others discussed recent VDR-related recommendations following the M/V Dali and El Faro incidents, plans to reactivate RTCM SC118 for standards development, and the process for updating IEC and IMO performance standards. Marcel Muise summarized lessons learned from the Dali bridge allision with the Francis Scott Key Bridge, including missing parametric data due to power supply gaps and the need for improvements in VDR design. Formal recommendations were issued to the Coast Guard and ANSI. Joseph Hersey explained that the IEC standard for VDRs has a stability date of 2028, but preparatory work and amendments can begin earlier. RTCM plans to reactivate SC118 to coordinate U.S. input and develop recommendations for IEC and IMO consideration.

e. Transport Canada: Glenn Coady noted the removal of VDES channels from the international configuration, which was briefly discussed during the four-digit numbering on VHF channels. He also noted MSLDs discussion was of big interest in Canada.

14. **Review Summary Record of 10 September 2025 and Continuing Work List.** The summary record of the previous Task Force meeting is posted on the Task Force website. The Continuing Work Program is appended to each agenda and updated as needed.

15. **Next Meeting of the GMDSS Task Force:** The Task Force will next meet in person on Wednesday 6 May 2026 0800-1030 EDT during the RTCM Annual Assembly being held at the Sonesta Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The draft agenda for the next meeting will be posted in the What's New section of www.rtcm.org once it is available.

GMDSS TASK FORCE CONTINUING WORK LIST

8 January 2026

1. Monitor FCC continuing action to update GMDSS Rules (TF)
2. Recommend actions to reduce false alerts in GMDSS systems (TF)
3. Monitor Coast Guard Port State GMDSS inspection program (TF)
4. Monitor programs that broadcast MSI for GMDSS Standards conformance (TF)
5. Review GMDSS Internet Web Sites and update Task Force portion of NAVCEN site (TF)
6. Support SOLAS Working Group planning for IMO NCSR and Joint Experts meetings (TF)
7. Advocate voluntary carriage of VHF and EPIRB/PLBs by all vessels offshore (TF)
8. Monitor FCC policy and practice on MMSI assignments (TF)
9. Monitor non-GMDSS systems: AIS, LRIT, SSAS, VDES, VMS, & E-Navigation (TF)
10. Recommend means to improve Distress Alerts by Cell Phone & Internet (TF)
11. Advocate mandatory Distress Beacons on R/V more than 3 miles offshore (TF)
12. Advocate use of the Alaska AIS Monitor Network for VHF Distress Guard (TF)
13. Monitor Developments in Cybersecurity and educate membership (TF)
14. Advocate Earliest Fitting of AIS on Coast Guard Helicopters (TF)
15. Review GMDSS concepts and make modernization recommendations (MOD)
16. Monitor automatic response to test calls to USCG HF Commstas (CV)
17. Recommend Safety Radio and VMS Requirements for Small Fishing Vessels (CV)
18. Recommend Safety Radio & Navigation Requirements for Towing Vessels (CV)
19. Recommend Safety Radio & Navigation Outfit for Small Passenger Vessels (CV)
20. Advocate better FCC & USCG management of annual GMDSS inspections (CV)
21. Maintain Inspection Guidelines and Check Lists for selected vessel types (CV)
22. Advocate voluntary training programs for users of GMDSS systems (RV)
23. Encourage GMDSS handbooks and Internet and video training aids (RV)
24. Encourage users of VHF-DSC to Register for MMSI and connect GPS (RV)
25. Encourage Mfrs to upgrade readability of GMDSS items in equipment manuals (SA)
26. Recommend proper interconnection of GPS receivers with DSC Radios (SA)
27. Coordinate with USCG-NMC and FCC on training uniformity (TR)
28. Maintain GMDSS Question Pools for FCC and Coast Guard Examinations (TR)

Key to cognizant groups:
(TF) Task Force
(CV) Commercial Vessel Task Group
(RV) Recreational Vessel Task Group
(SA) Service Agents and Manufacturers Task Group
(TR) Training Task Group
(MOD) GMDSS Modernization Task Group

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