

## **SAFETY INFORMATION NOTICE**

No. 3 of 2014

### **Distress Beacons**

Issued 16 August 2014

#### **Issue**

Understanding some peculiarities related to distress beacons

#### **Background**

Distress beacons now form a very valuable component of boat safety. Their usefulness has been proved on many occasions to alert authorities to people in distress and assist in locating them. The beacons are sophisticated devices and users should be aware of some important aspects of their operation.

In the marine environment there are two principal types of distress beacons that are used; the **Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon (EPIRB)** for ships and boats and the **Personal Locator Beacon (PLB)** for personal use. Carriage of a registered 406 MHz EPIRB in vessels sailing more than two nautical miles offshore is mandatory

#### **Notice**

##### ***GPS vs Non-GPS***

A GPS-equipped beacon has a location accuracy of 120 metres and location is provided to Rescue Coordination Centre (RCC) Australia by geo-stationary satellites within minutes. Non-GPS beacons have a location accuracy of five kilometres. The satellite system, typically takes 90 minutes to calculate the initial position from a beacon which is not GPS equipped, but it may take up to 5 hours depending on the conditions.

##### ***Using your beacon***

EPIRBs are designed to float in water and use the water plane to maximise the signal upwards to the satellite. Use the lanyard and secure it to something that is not going to sink and allow it to float free. An EPIRB activated on land or in a boat must remain vertical to ensure the signal is not greatly degraded.

PLBs are waterproof with some designed to float, others require a neoprene pouch for flotation. Regardless of flotation they are not designed to float upright, so if activating a PLB at sea it should be supported so that its antenna remains vertical and out of the water. PLBs are not considered a substitute for EPIRBs when adhering to state and territory maritime regulations on the carriage of EPIRBs for offshore craft.

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### ***Registering your beacon***

Distress beacons can be registered online via [www.amsa.gov.au/beacons](http://www.amsa.gov.au/beacons). To improve response times, ensure distress beacons are registered, trip details have been submitted to AMSA online and inform emergency contacts of trip details. If the 406 MHz beacon is registered, it will provide vital information to rescuers about who you are, where you are, what your boat looks like and your emergency contact.

AMSA issues registration stickers to provide distress beacon owners, marine inspectors and safety equipment auditors with proof of current registration. The sticker will note the HexID/UIN of the beacon, its registration expiry date (two years from date of issue) and vessel name, registration number or owner's name depending on type of beacon and use. This registration sticker must be affixed to the beacon. If a current sticker is not found affixed to a beacon during a safety equipment inspection you may be liable to a fine.

If your beacon is not properly registered you will be hindering your own recovery at a time when help is most needed.

### ***Overseas beacons***

Cospas-Sarsat is a satellite-based Search and Rescue (SAR) system that monitors and distributes distress alerts from beacons anywhere on the Earth's surface. If an Australian-coded distress beacon is activated overseas, an alert will be sent to the Rescue Coordination Centre (RCC) responsible for the region in which the distress incident is occurring. A second notification is then sent to RCC Australia as the registrar for the beacon. Australian residents who buy a distress beacon registered elsewhere must have the beacon recoded with the Australian country code by a local agent and have it registered with AMSA.

### ***Stowing your distress beacon***

Distress beacons should be stowed in their mounting bracket where visible and easy to access in an emergency or in a grab bag along with flares, a torch or strobe and other safety equipment. If possible keep it out of the weather and locked away when the vessel is not in use. An additional beacon can be stowed in any inflatable life raft carried in the vessel. When storing an EPIRB, ensure it is correctly stowed in its bracket as a number of EPIRBs have water activated switches that are armed when the EPIRB is removed from its bracket or incorrectly replaced in its bracket. Ensure crew are aware of the location of the beacon and how to activate in an emergency.

### ***Accidental activation***

EPIRBs and PLBs may have water or manual activation, or both. If your beacon is accidentally activated the most important thing to do is switch off the beacon and notify RCC Australia as soon as possible by calling 1800 641 792 to ensure a search and rescue operation is not commenced. Some water activated beacons can be switched off by placing it back in the mounting bracket.

### ***Batteries and disposal***

Distress beacon batteries need to be replaced before the expiry date noted on the label of the beacon. Battery life varies depending on the model of the beacon. Batteries should only be replaced by the beacon manufacturer or their Australian agent. Distress beacons need to be disposed of responsibly in case they accidentally activate and trigger a false alarm. Individuals are able to dispose of their unwanted beacons through Battery World.

For more information regarding distress beacons visit:

[Australian Maritime Safety Authority](#)  
[Roads and Maritime New South Wales](#)  
[Marine Safety Northern Territory](#)  
[Maritime Safety Queensland](#)  
[Department of Planning Transport and Infrastructure South Australia](#)

[Marine and Safety Tasmania](#)  
[Transport Safety Victoria](#)  
[Department of Transport Western Australia](#)