

Is the Coast Guard Still there for us?

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Issue:

I recently overheard a Cruiser say, with conviction that the Coast Guard had downsized and would soon not be there for us. *As an old ham operator, his plan was to call 14,300 kHz if he had an emergency.* This Cruiser had just come to Mexico for the first time so it is possible things changed with my absence from the US. I may not have heard the latest information! Needless to say, his statement concerned me enough to investigate.

Cruisers should try to keep an open mind to new information. Make sure you get the details.

My Action:

My first stop was the Coast Guard Web site. From the site it was clear the new emphasis was on Digital Selective Calling (DSC). That makes a lot of sense since a distress call using DSC has a much higher possibility of getting immediate attention. The Coast Guard has a clear plan for response to DSC distress calls. The US Coast Guard plan claims to be consistent with the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) study group recommendations.

I was unable to find some of the information I have referenced in the past related to voice calling on the 4, 6, 8, 12, and 16 MHz safety channels. My next step was to contact the Coast Guard and ask the status of emergency communications.

What I found out was:

- The Coast Guard now refers to the Emergency frequencies as GMDSS frequencies. GMDSS is Global Maritime Distress and Safety System that was implemented based on an IMO mandate for enhanced safety at sea of all vessels.
- The Point Reyes Communications facility is monitoring for voice communications on 4208.0; 6215.0; 8291.0; 12,290.0; and 16,420.0 kHz.
- Working Channels are duplex.
- Coast Guard monitors for DSC distress calls. DSC provides the highest possibility for assistance and is rated as the highest priority method for GMDSS vessels in an emergency.

DSC Calling is your safest bet for help

A DSC call is intended to alert a shore station of your distress condition. DSC receivers initiate a very loud alarm when a DSC distress signal is detected. *It cannot be ignored!* If no shore station acknowledges a DSC distress call within 4.9 minutes, all GMDSS vessels (Vessels over 300 tons) are required to send a DSC Distress Relay after five minutes. When all the GMDSS vessels complete a distress relay, your distress call may end up being heard around the world. Someone will know your situation and initiating help in minutes. That is what GMDSS is all about....

This is as opposed to EPIRB, which may take hours for response and Sat phones that are totally dependent on knowing the right number to call for the area you are located in. GMDSS is worldwide so if you are cruising in other countries, there are people listening there too.