



PUBLIC NOTICE

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FCC ENFORCEMENT ADVISORY

EMERGENCY BEACONS

Enforcement Bureau Reminds Users of all Emergency Locator Beacons About Their Proper Use and Registration

What are Emergency Beacons and How Are They Used?

The FCC authorizes three types of emergency beacons for transmitting distress signals: Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRBs) for maritime use, Emergency Locator Transmitters (ELTs) for aviation use, and Personal Locator Beacons (PLBs) for land-based use. All emergency beacons operating on frequency 406 MHz can be tracked by satellites and must be registered with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for Search and Rescue Satellite Aided Tracking (SARSAT). As discussed below, false alarms from or failures to register emergency beacons may result in substantial monetary penalties (up to \$112,500 for any single act).

Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRBs)

EPIRBs are used for commercial and personal watercraft. Pursuant to the FCC's Rules, only EPIRBs operating on frequency 406 MHz may be manufactured, imported or sold in the United States.¹ A separate license is not required to operate an EPIRB. The frequency 406 MHz has been designated internationally for use only for distress signals. The 406 MHz EPIRBs are divided into two categories. Category I EPIRBs are activated either manually or automatically. The automatic activation is triggered when the EPIRB is released from its bracket. Category II EPIRBs are activated manually.

Detected by Satellites. A 406 MHz EPIRB signal can be instantly detected by satellites, which allows a search and rescue team to accurately locate the EPIRB and identify the vessel anywhere in the world. Even a brief inadvertent activation on frequency 406 MHz can generate a false alert and is a violation of FCC Rules, thereby subjecting the operator to potential monetary penalties up to \$112,500. Operators should take every precaution to avoid such activations because activations do not create an audible tone.

Must Be Registered. The FCC requires that all 406 MHz EPIRBs be registered with NOAA.² Failure to register an EPIRB may subject its owner to monetary penalties up to \$112,500. More importantly, registration will help rescue forces find a vessel faster in an emergency and allows the operator to contribute to the safety of others by not needlessly occupying search and rescue resources that may be needed in an actual emergency.

Emergency Locator Transmitters (ELTs)

ELTs operate as part of an aircraft or a survival craft station as locating aids for survival purposes.³ ELTs were the first emergency beacons developed and most U.S. civil aircraft are required to carry them. ELTs were originally intended for use on the frequency 121.5 MHz to alert aircraft flying overhead. Obviously, a major limitation to the early ELTs is that another aircraft

¹ 47 CFR §§ 80.1051–80.1061.

² 47 CFR § 80.1061(f).

³ 47 CFR § 87.193.

must be within range and listening to frequency 121.5 MHz to receive the signal. While ELTs operating on frequency 121.5 MHz are still permitted in the United States, ELTs operating on frequency 406 MHz are also available and encouraged.⁴ A separate license is not required to operate an ELT.

Detected by Satellites. 406 MHz ELT ELTs have the same advantages as 406 MHz EPIRBs: they can be instantly detected by satellites, which allow a search and rescue team to accurately locate the 406 MHz ELT anywhere in the world. ELTs can also be activated manually or automatically. Inadvertent and non-emergency-related activations violate FCC Rules and may subject the operator to monetary penalties up to \$112,500.

Must Be Registered. Also like 406 MHz EPIRBs, 406 MHz ELTs must be registered with NOAA.⁵ Failure to register can result in monetary penalties up to \$112,500.

Personal Locator Beacons (PLBs)

PLBs are portable units that operate as emergency beacons, like EPIRBs or ELTs, except that these beacons are designed to be carried by an individual instead of on a boat or aircraft. Also, like EPIRBs or ELTs, the FCC authorizes PLBs to be used only for distress and safety communications.⁶ PLBs are licensed by rule, and an individual license is not required.

Detected by Satellite. PLBs can only be activated manually and operate exclusively on frequency 406 MHz.⁷ Like 406 MHz EPIRBs and ELTs, they can be instantly detected by satellites. Inadvertent and non-emergency-related activations are a violation of FCC Rules and may subject the operator to monetary penalties up to \$112,500.

Must Be Registered. The FCC requires that PLBs also be registered with NOAA.⁸ Failure to register can result in monetary penalties up to \$112,500.

Registering An Emergency Beacon

As discussed above, all emergency beacons (EPIRBs, ELTs or PLBs) that operate on frequency 406 MHz must be registered with NOAA. Registration is free of charge and can be done online at the following website: <http://www.beaconregistration.noaa.gov/>

Paper copies of registration forms can also be downloaded from the following websites:

EPIRBs: <https://beaconregistration.noaa.gov/rgdb/forms/epirb.pdf>

ELTs: <https://beaconregistration.noaa.gov/rgdb/forms/elt.pdf>

PLBs: <https://beaconregistration.noaa.gov/rgdb/forms/plb.pdf>

Need more information?

To file a complaint, visit www.fcc.gov/complaints or call 1-888-CALL-FCC. For additional information regarding enforcement of the FCC Rules concerning emergency beacons, visit the websites below or email MarineRadio@fcc.gov. Media inquiries should be directed to Mark Wigfield at (202) 418-0253 or Mark.Wigfield@fcc.gov.

- For information related to EPIRBs and other maritime radio information, please visit the FCC website at http://wireless.fcc.gov/services/index.htm?job=licensing&id=ship_stations
- For information related to ELTs and other aviation radio information, please visit the FCC website at http://wireless.fcc.gov/services/index.htm?job=service_home&id=aviation
- For information related to PLBs, please visit the FCC website at <http://www.fcc.gov/encyclopedia/personal-locator-beacons-plbs>.

To request materials in accessible formats for people with disabilities (Braille, large print, electronic files, audio format), send an e-mail to fcc504@fcc.gov or call the Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau at 202-418-0530 (voice), (202) 418-0432 (TTY). You may also contact the Enforcement Bureau on its TTY line at (202) 418-1148 for further information about this Enforcement Advisory, or the FCC on its TTY line at 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) for further information about maritime radio, aviation radio, or personal locator beacons.

Issued by: Chief, Enforcement Bureau

⁴ 47 CFR § 87.199.

⁵ 47 CFR § 87.199(f).

⁶ 47 CFR §§ 95.1400–95.1402.

⁷ 47 CFR § 95.1401.

⁸ 47 CFR § 95.1402(f).