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Digital Selective Calling (DSC) VHF Radios

Do you have a Digital Selective Calling (DSC) equipped VHF Radio on your vessel? Do you know about all of its capabilities? Are you sure it is installed and connected properly so it is fully functional?

Digital Selective Calling (DSC) is a newer technology associated with VHF radios that makes it easier to identify and locate a vessel in distress. The technology allows enhanced distress radio messages to be sent digitally and automatically in the event of an emergency. At the touch of a button, it can transmit an alert with vessel information, position, and the nature of the distress (if entered) to other DSC-equipped vessels and rescue facilities. It also allows the operator to “privately” hail another DSC-equipped vessel that has registered for and been assigned an identity number. DSC-capable radios have been on the market for several years.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has required new fixed mount VHF radios introduced in the U.S. to be equipped with the DSC feature since 1999. DSC radios must at least have single-button emergency transmission capability. To make your DSC-equipped VHF radio fully functional, you must obtain a Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI) number and have it linked to a compatible GPS device or Loran unit.



The MMSI number is a unique nine (9) digit number that is assigned to a DSC radio station. For commercial fishing vessels, if you already have a valid Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Ship Radio Station License, or you operate in international waters, you need to contact the FCC to get your MMSI number. Call 1-888-CALLFCC or go to <http://wireless.fcc.gov/>. When you are issued a MMSI number, your vessel information is also registered in the Coast Guard’s national distress database for emergency use.

For recreational vessels, the radio can be registered for free through BoatU.S. or Sea Tow by obtaining an MMSI Assignment Form. Forms are available on their respective web sites at: www.boatus.com or by calling 1-800-563-1536; www.seatow.com or by calling 1-800-473-2869.

Channel 70 is reserved exclusively for use with DSC and it is monitored by commercial vessels that must meet the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) services requirements. The Coast Guard will continue to monitor Channel 16 for emergency distress calls. In certain areas, the Coast Guard’s new Rescue 21 (command, control, and communications) system is on-line or coming on-line and will be able to receive DSC distress calls. For information on and implementation of these systems, you should visit:

- www.uscg.mil/rescue21
- www.navcen.uscg.gov/marcomms/gmdss

DSC VHF Radios WILL:

- Have a one-button emergency transmit feature to send out the vessel’s MMSI number and information, and if connected to a GPS or Loran, the vessel’s latitude/longitude position.
- Continue to send a distress signal even if the captain is incapacitated.
- Allow for an inexperienced VHF user to send, with the one-button feature, a goof-proof continuous distress message.
- Privately hail another DSC-equipped vessel with a known MMSI number. Like having a “VHF phone number,” it avoids having to monitor for a call from a fellow operator; it “rings” your radio and then switches you automatically to the channel your caller is waiting on.
- When properly connected to a Loran or GPS, a “polling” feature transmits your vessel’s position in a digital display, that can be monitored by DSC-equipped radio stations or vessels.
- Fully function as all other VHF radios.

The DSC function on VHF Radios WILL NOT:

- Be monitored by the Coast Guard in all areas until Rescue21 is fully implemented replacing the National Distress and Response System.
- Provide private radio to radio communication. After a “private” digital hail, DSC radios switch automatically to an open active working VHF channel chosen by the caller.
- Take advantage of all functions without first registering for a unique MMSI number.

For more information, contact the Coast Guard, your Fishing Vessel Examiner, or Coast Guard Auxiliary.

www.FishSafe.info