Maritime and Coastguard Agency

NEWS RELEASE

Press Notice No: 406/08 **Monday, April 21, 2008**

CHANGES TO DISTRESS BEACON FREQUENCIES

From February next year, only 406 MHz and not 121.5/243 MHz emergency beacons will be processed within the international satellite-aided search and rescue system called COSPAS-SARSAT. This affects all maritime beacons (EPIRBS), all aviation emergency locator transponders (ELTs) and all personal locator beacons (PLBs) operating on the 121.5/243 MHz bands.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency, along with partner organisations, is therefore encouraging all seafarers to begin taking steps to ensure they have an initial emergency alerting alternative such as a 406MHz beacon system.

“The 406MHz system is far superior to its older 121.5/243 MHz sibling,” says Chris Blockley-Webb, of the MCA’s Navigation Safety Branch. “It has a unique encoding which means that specific information about the vessel and its owners is available from the EPIRB (Emergency Positioning Indicating Radio Beacon) Register, that any vessel in difficulty can be pinpointed down to a distance of 120 metres and that a stronger signal from the beacon is guaranteed.

“Seafarers can still retain the 121.5/243 MHz beacons if they so wish, but should be aware that these can only be used as a homing device for search and rescue assets and not as an initial alerting system. If you want to dispose of your 121.5/243 MHz beacon, you can do so either by removing the old lithium battery to avoid accidental activation and then disposing of it at a local authority designated collection facility or by trading it in through a distributor take back scheme (some manufacturers are offering special deals for trade in for a new 406 MHz beacon).”

The 406 beacon has been available to seafarers for 23 years and has already contributed to many lives being saved.

In January last year the 406MHz beacon from an Irish fishing vessel ‘Discovery’ started transmitting. The vessel was 160 miles west of the Isles of Scilly. There were seven people on board the vessel which had capsized and had no

communications other than the 406 beacon. Five fishermen took to one liferaft and the other two took to another. Unfortunately as the vessel turned over it punctured the liferaft with the two fishermen in and it started to deflate.

Following the 406 MHz beacon 'hit', Falmouth Coastguard worked in conjunction with the Irish Coastguard to send resources to the seven fishermen. They were able to pinpoint exactly where to send the search and rescue resources due to the signal from the 406 beacon. The Irish Coastguard aircraft 'Casa Maritime Patrol' located the fishermen relatively quickly and a nearby ship, the Ultra Large Crude Carrier 'Front Commander' was asked to turn around and send its ship's lifeboats out to rescue the fishermen who were then taken back to the ship, before being airlifted off by a UK military helicopter.

"These seven fishermen almost certainly owe their lives to the 406Mhz beacon which they had onboard," says Andy Cattrell, a Watch Manager at Falmouth Coastguard. "The two men whose liferaft was deflated had been in the water for nearly five hours by the time that they were found and it is incredible that they survived as long as they did. It would have been very difficult to find them if they had only had the old 121.5/243 MHz beacon onboard. The crude carrier also did an impressive job of manoeuvring close to the liferafts, launching their ship's boat and rescuing the fishermen."

"For all vessels from the smallest yacht to the largest ship, the 406 beacon really can make a massive difference in the time that it will take us to find you."

For further information please contact
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