



# FACT SHEET: Communications equipment

Each year, more than 500 lives are lost nationally in recreational boating accidents. Boating safely includes having emergency communications equipment. Timing and location are the most important factors for a Search and Rescue (SAR) operation to be successful. The quicker rescuers can search for someone, the better the chances for survival.



Communications equipment varies from simple to complex. Boaters should research the many options and make sure they choose appropriately for the type of boating activity. The following are the most common forms of communications equipment for boaters.

Type of equipment	How it works...
<b>VHF radio</b>	<p>A very high frequency (VHF) waterproof radio lets boaters directly broadcast their need for help to other boaters and authorities. VHF radios come in many sizes and can be hand-held or mounted on a vessel.</p> <p>Channel 16 is the emergency channel. Boaters need to be familiar with appropriate use of the channel and the requirements for making MayDay calls. In U.S. Coast Guard jurisdictions, VHF radios are monitored 24 hours a day, seven days a week.</p> <p>VHF coverage is available in most areas but not all. VHF's mounted on boats are of little use if a boat sinks or a person is separated from the vessel.</p>
<b>Distress beacons</b>	<p>A beacon is designed to float in water and transmit a distress message and GPS location via satellite to SAR teams. There are two types of distress beacons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A <b>personal locator beacon (PLB)</b> is about the size of a mobile phone and can be hand held and/or clipped to a life jacket.</li> <li>• An <b>emergency position-indicating radio beacon (EPIRB)</b> is larger than a PLB and can be mounted in a vessel or stored in an emergency ditch bag.</li> </ul> <p>Distress beacons may not be necessary in highly used waterways where rescuers can easily locate a boater.</p>
<b>Visual distress signals</b>	<p>A visual distress signal (VDS) grabs attention over long distances. There are a variety of types including flares that emit an intense bright red flame or orange plume of smoke, electric S.O.S. distress lights and orange flags.</p> <p>Visual distress signals are limited in use and location detection. Flares must be replaced every few years, as they expire.</p>
<b>Cell phones</b>	<p>A mobile device can be used to call 911 for emergency assistance.</p> <p>Cell phones only work in certain areas and are susceptible to moisture damage that may cause them not to work when needed.</p>
<b>Sounding devices</b>	<p>A whistle, horn or bell used to grab attention of other people nearby.</p> <p>Sounding devices are limited in use and location detection.</p>



## Equipment required by law

**Federally regulated waterways** (coastal and open bodies of water two miles or more in width) require the following:

- All boats are required to carry a sounding device at all times.
- Boats less than 16 feet operating between sunset and sunrise are required to carry one electric S.O.S. distress light or a combination of three day/night flares.
- For boats longer than 16 feet, operating at any time, there are multiple VDS options to choose from that will meet legal requirements:
  - A combination of three day/night flares, or
  - One orange distress flag, or
  - One electric S.O.S. distress light, or
  - Three orange smoke signals and one electric S.O.S. distress light.

**State regulated waterways** only require a sounding device be carried, and this applies to all boat sizes at all times.

## State Parks Boating Program recommends...

Federal and state law requirements are minimal and do not maximize a boater's chances of being rescued in a timely manner when an accident happens. The State Parks Boating Program recommends that boaters **carry at least two forms of reliable communications equipment** (that will work wet) when out boating—in case one form does not work. Different types work in different areas. Boaters need to make sure the types they choose will work in the areas they are boating.

## Need more information?

- Radio Information for Boaters, *U.S. Department of Homeland Security*  
<https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/?pageName=mtBoater>.
- Saved by the Beacon Campaign, *National Safe Boating Council*  
<http://www.safeboatingcouncil.org/assets/docs/savedbythebeacon-cover%20image.pdf> and  
<http://www.safeboatingcouncil.org/saved-by-the-beacon-campaign>.
- Flares and Distress Signals, *Boat U.S. Foundation*  
<https://www.boatus.org/distress-signals/> and <https://www.boatus.org/findings/45/>.
- Visual Distress Signals, *U.S. Coast Guard*  
<https://www.uscg.mil/hq/cg5/cg5214/vds.asp#vdsrequirements>.
- Methods for Contacting the U.S. Coast Guard  
[https://www.uscg.mil/hq/cg5/cg534/Contact\\_CG.asp](https://www.uscg.mil/hq/cg5/cg534/Contact_CG.asp).