

Does your marine VHF radio have a red flap labeled DISTRESS? If yes, then you most likely have a radio capable of Digital Selective Calling (DSC). The DSC capable radio supports a host of safety and convince features. The most important feature is that the radio can quickly send out a formatted digital distress call to the Coast Guard and all DSC radios near your location. The formatted data digital message will include the hailing vessel's name, GPS location of the vessel and the nature of distress. This would be the quickest way to get a response to an emergency.

Another communication feature of the DSC capable radio is the ability to call other DSC radio or a group of radios selectively. This feature is similar to a texting, where one selects one or more phone numbers, composes a message and sends the message. A receiving phone gets the message and gives an alert. The DSC capable radio process is similar. One selects a MMSI number from the radio's stored MMSI list, composes a message (the message could be to join the caller on channel 68, 69, 71 or 72 for a conversation) and sends the message. The message will be sent on channel 70 (channel 70 is reserved for digital calling only! No voice calling allowed on channel 70). The selectively called DSC always monitors channel 70 and when a message directed to the radio or an emergency message is received, the radio sounds an alarm (audio tone) and displays a message. The selective calling feature is just one of the host of options available to DSC capable radios.

Radios with DSC need two additional installation procedures:

1) All owners of DSC radios MUST obtain a MMSI Identifier.

Currently, there are two organizations that can provide the MMSI identifier to recreational boaters: Boat US (free, to members all others \$25). For registering you get a complimentary 1 yr Boat US membership. <http://www.boatus.com/MMSI/MMSI/ObtainMMSI#!> or by calling 1-800-563-1536, Power Squadron (free) http://www.usps.org/php/mmsi_new/.

The registration will require extensive information about the vessel and person to contact in the event of an emergency. The MMSI number must be entered in the radio. Think of the MMSI number the same as a phone number. It is a number that is unique and associated via a world-wide-directory to your vessel.

2) Radio must have access to a GPS location.

The position of the vessel can be obtained by the radio from an internal GPS (if equipped) or external GPS. If the radio does NOT have an internal GPS than the radio MUST be connected to a GPS device (chart plotter, Radar) with a signal cable. It is critical that the GPS device be operational whenever the radio is operational. The connection is a NMEA two wire protocol. Simply connect the plus (+) NMEA from the GPS source to the plus NMEA wire on the radio. Similarly, connect the minus (-). . Consult your GPS/Plotter and VHF Radio manuals for specifics.

Testing

The functioning of the DISTRESS button (red button) can NOT be tested. The activation of the DISTRESS function sends out a distress signal repeatedly (approximately every 4 Minutes) until another DSC radio responds to the distress call. The message can be paused or stopped by canceling the distress call or shutting the radio off.

If you want to test ONLY the MMSI function you can call a friend with a known MMSI number for confirmation.

The KPBA club house MMSI number is 338166526

A fully functioning DSC radio (valid MMSI number, active GPS) will greatly increase the chance of getting aid when a problem arises. With a press of a button a distress message will be sent and repeated on a 4 minute interval. These messages also receive priority over all other radio traffic at the Coast Guard.