

GMDSS TASK FORCE

Newsletter and Summary Record of 6 May 2026 Meeting

1. **The Task Force Meeting.** This Newsletter reports on the recent meeting of the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) Task Force sponsored by the U.S. Coast Guard and the Radio Technical Commission for Maritime Services (RTCM) and held in conjunction with the RTCM Annual Assembly on 6 May 2026. The Task Force is dedicated to monitoring the success and shortcomings of the GMDSS. The Task Force is also active in current efforts to modernize the GMDSS and monitors related developments in maritime radio and electronic navigation (e-navigation). The Task Force advocates voluntary use of radio safety equipment by all vessels and makes recommendations to government authorities to improve safety at sea regulations.
2. **Task Force membership.** Membership is open to individuals associated with commercial vessel operations, recreational vessel interests, training institutions, service agents, manufacturers, government authorities and any interested person or organization, and there is no fee for participation. New members are welcome; to join, send your name, organization (if any), email address, and telephone number (optional) to the Director, Bill Cairns, at gmdsstf@rtcm.org. Members who are unable to attend Task Force meetings are invited to participate by email correspondence and to connect with Task Force meetings by conference call or virtual meeting platform. This Newsletter goes out to over 6000 members after each meeting. The Task Force also maintains a website at <https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/task-force-background>.
3. **The Summary Record.** This record of the meeting is provided for information and will be posted on the Task Force portion of the Coast Guard NAVCEN web site and the RTCM web site. The GMDSS Task Force was held in person on 6 May 2026 at the Sonesta Fort Lauderdale, Fort Lauderdale Beach, FL. The meeting was attended by 61 members either in person, through Microsoft Teams, or by phone.
4. **Distribution of Information Papers:**
 - a. The following Papers of interest were noted and are available to all on the website:** <https://www.jocel.com/GMDSSTaskForce>
 - i. Voyage Data Recorder and other electronic data
 - ii. Delete Part 80 2026-01884.pdf
 - iii. FCC NPRM on Equipment Authorization and TCBs April 2026
 - iv. FCC certification MRA requirement
 - v. IMO.Res_A.1203(34)_MOBSAT_Perf_std
 - vi. IMO_Res_A.1202(34)_charges
 - vii. MMSI Working Group Agenda 6 May 2026
 - viii. NDAA 2026 AIS Exemption
 - ix. NTSB Dali report MIR2540
 - x. NTSB findings regarding VDRs

5. **Recreational Vessel Group:** Gene Danko from the US Power Squadron leads the Recreational Vessel Task Group. He reported that at the 2025 meeting, there remained 2 action items for the Rec Vessel Group, which have since been completed. This Group will remain active and able to respond to GMDSS issues relevant to recreational vessels.

a. Report of the National Boating Safety Advisory Committee: Brian Moore was not able to attend. He provided a written report noting that there is still no action on the reestablishment of the National Boating Safety Advisory Committee or whatever its next iteration is going to be named.

6. **Commercial Vessel Task Group:** Nothing to report

7. **Service Agents and Manufacturers Task Group:** Nothing to report.

8. **Training Task Group:** Group chair Kurt Anderson from MITAGS was unable to participate. Peter Hyams from Star Center described recent collaboration on the FCC Element 7 exam for GMDSS, including past efforts to streamline the question pool and ongoing concerns about the test's length and relevance, as well as the inclusion of practical exercises such as radio telex operations. On the Radio Telex training and course approval, discussion included whether to retain radio telex tasks in GMDSS courses, with the consensus to keep them due to their continued presence on vessels, despite uncertainty about future Coast Guard approval and the lack of refresher training requirements.

9. **Coast Guard Reports:** USCG representatives provided updates on Coast Guard activities, international meetings (NCSR, MSC, ICAO/IMO JWG), and regulatory developments affecting GMDSS, including satellite communications, VHF digitization, and SAR standards.

a. Updates on IMO NCSR/MSC meetings: Patrick Gallagher outlined preparations for upcoming NCSR and MSC meetings, including work on long-range identification and tracking, protection of Iridium from regulatory changes, and the digitization of the VHF Marine Band, which may require future radio replacements. Updates included the approval of VDES as an AIS substitute for 2028, ongoing work on VDES performance standards, and the gradual introduction of VDES into maritime operations.

b. Joint IMO/ITU Experts Group: Patrick Gallagher noted that the Experts Group would be held later in the Sep/Oct timeframe.

c. ICAO/IMO Joint Working Group: Dave Edwards presented a comprehensive report on the ICAO/IMO JWG, covering recent meetings, the publication of the new IAMSAR Manual, work on SAR standards, psychological first aid, autonomy in SAR, and coordination with organizations like IMRF and NATO. The JWG addressed topics such as autonomous distress tracking, search planning simplification, and the integration of search plans into navigation systems, with ongoing collaboration between the US, UK, and IMRF. Chris Hoffman and Dave Edwards discussed the status of two-way communications in second-generation beacons, noting that while the topic is currently quiet in the JWG, coordination between COSPAS-SARSAT and the SAR community remains important.

d. NAVTEX outages: Patrick Geddes, Patrick Gallagher, and other participants discussed ongoing NAVTEX outages, infrastructure deterioration, and the lack of user feedback, with additional input from NGA and suggestions for future solutions. NAVTEX stations in Honolulu and New Orleans are experiencing extended outages due to storm damage, flooding,

and spare parts shortages, with temporary measures such as broadcasting from Guam and ongoing repair efforts. Despite significant outages, few complaints are received from mariners, even when outreach is attempted, making it difficult to assess the impact and prioritize repairs. Suggested potential solutions include using satellite-based alternatives like EGC, but current plans are limited by infrastructure costs and agency coordination; the Coast Guard is not feeling external pressure to expedite solutions. NGA recommended including clearer information in EGC warnings about alternative broadcast sources during outages, and Eric Weber noted that many ships may lack the equipment to receive HF broadcasts due to regulatory changes.

e. ITU-R WP5B Update: Johnny Schultz and Joe Hersey provided updates on ITU-R WP5B activities, including major revisions to AIS and VDES standards, changes to MMSI management, and ongoing work on DSC, radar SART, and other technical recommendations. Significant changes to AIS (Recommendation 1371) include removal of channel management requirements and the introduction of a single slot ATON message, while VDES (Recommendation 2092) was updated to reflect lessons learned from manufacturer trials. Updates to MMSI management address limitations for MOB, SARTs, and EPIRBs, with new encoding methods to ensure unique device identification. Work continues on recommendations for DSC operational procedures, radar SART compatibility with solid-state radars, and the use of the 10th digit in MMSIs for multiple radios on a vessel. Additional reports are being revised to reflect changes from recent World Radio Conferences, and new recommendations on digital voice and R-mode are under development.

f. Four Digit Numbering of VHF Channels: Joe Hersey addressed Four Digit Numbering of VHF Channels. Four-digit VHF channel numbering is now standard, with radios being sold accordingly; six channels will be phased out by 2030, affecting both US and Canadian operations.

g. VHF-FM voice blocking AIS on own ship and close by: Joe Hersey addressed the problem that keying a VHF radio blocks AIS reception on vessels, and while technical solutions like cavity filters exist, they are costly and not widely adopted; the issue is not widely reported by users. There was debate over the official stance that AIS is not for collision avoidance, with several participants emphasizing its practical importance for mariners, especially those without radar.

h. Status of Class D DSC Radios: A new Class D DSC standard is nearing completion, addressing issues such as GNSS integration and MMSI resetting, with plans to petition the FCC for regulatory adoption.

i. Radar SART Performance: It was noted that this subject had been addressed in detail the previous day at the RTCM assembly. One major SOLAS manufacturer has implemented a one-step activation of a SART mode and a one-step reversion from the SART mode rather than a multi-step. The problem with going into the SART mode is there could be many steps involved to make the SARTs visible. When this is done, it makes the radar useless for navigation, which is not helpful when looking for survivors. This manufacturer has also implemented an indicator when a SART is present. IEC has its SOLAS radar standard up for comment and the US submitted a comment proposing that this one step SART mode and reversion from SART mode be mandatory in radars. There is a US paper into NCSR 13 addressing this issue again with some liaison statements to both ITU and IEC.

j. AIS Mobile ATON: Joe Hersey and others discussed the status of AIS mobile ATON standards, the use of fishnet markers, and regulatory challenges in the US, Canada, and Europe. RTCM completed a new edition of the AIS mobile ATON standard to incorporate ITU's single

slot message, improving information and compatibility for mobile ATONs. The US continues to allow unrecognized low-cost devices for fishnet marking due to congressional direction, while Europe mandates a different approach, leading to interoperability concerns.

k. Interpreting USCG uninspected fishing vessel carriage requirements: This had also been a topic of discussion the previous day at Assembly. Ed Thiedeman noted that fishing vessel carriage requirements is a focus within the RTCM Special Committee 128 on satellite emergency notification devices, because that is the communications medium that is being considered as a potential solution for this need. The FCC and the Coast Guard have started discussions.

l. Transition of SARSAT Program from NOAA to Coast Guard: Participants provided updates on satellite systems, including COSPAS-SARSAT, Iridium, and others, with a focus on constellation health, new deployments, and upcoming workshops. The COSPAS-SARSAT system continues to expand with new MEOSAR, LEOSAR, and GEOSAR assets, maintaining robust coverage and preparing for future enhancements. The SARSAT program lead transitioned from NOAA to the Coast Guard, with ongoing efforts to achieve operational milestones and address false alerts, and upcoming presentations scheduled for the Beacon Manufacturers Workshop.

m. Recommendation to IMO MSC that all mariners carry PLBs: MSC was ongoing and considering the paper proposing that all mariners carry PLBs. The TF will follow up on outcome of MSC on this issue at its next meeting.

n. MSLDs: USCG has submitted a paper into NCSR 13 advocating for the voluntary carriage of MSLD devices and provided information on the different types. It suggests that IMO consider how these devices work within the maritime safety structure and whether they should be carried voluntarily. There is also a need for guidance to mariners on how to select the appropriate MSLD for their working environment.

o. Aqua Alert Bill in Congress for Relaying MSI Alerts to Cell Phones That Register for the Voluntary Service: The Coast Guard pilot implementations of the Aqua Alert capability are in Long Island Sound, Eastern Lake Erie (what used to be sector Buffalo) and also in sector Los Angeles/Long Beach. Those three areas are up and running. It reaches out to USCG partners in each area, e.g., police, fire departments, etc. They expect more activity with the system as we enter the summer boating season. They are also looking to move from the pilot program to a full Coast Guard wide program and looking at what are the challenges to be overcome to implement that. There are some contractual and FCC regulatory issues yet to be resolved. There was recently a proposed notice of rulemaking issued by the FCC that had to do with doing these alerts over satellite extended networks.

10. MMSI WG and related issues: Due to time constraints for the Task Force, Joe Hersey noted that the MMSI WG would address the following issues at the WG meeting in the afternoon of 6 May. The following are being considered by this group:

- a. MMSI Management
- b. MMSI reset
- c. US Power Squadrons assuming Sea Tow-registered MMSIs
- d. Registering MMSIs used by autonomous vessels

11. Satellite systems: It was noted that Inmarsat and Iridium had provided system updates previously at the Assembly. COSPAS-SARSAT noted they have nearly a full constellation for

MEOSAR for the Galileo, getting a very large number for JPS, and also a few GLONASS which are added one by one. In terms of LEO, they have two new LEOSARs that were commissioned to replace partly the ones that were decommissioned last year by NOAA and Coast Guard.

12. FCC Reports: Katie Knox provided updates on FCC inspection forms, E911/NG911 initiatives, MMSI management, and new rules for electronic device testing, with reminders for compliance and upcoming comment periods. FCC inspection forms have been updated to reflect SOLAS changes and are now fillable PDFs, with the FCC seal added for recognition; vessels must use the complete forms to remain compliant. The FCC is advancing E911 and NG911 initiatives, engaging with RTCM SC128, and addressing issues with decommissioned federal vessels and MMSI data management. New rules will prohibit device testing in countries without mutual recognition agreements, and updates to Parts 80 and 95 standards are pending, with waiver processes in place for new equipment.

13. Reports from other Governmental and International Agencies:

a. NOAA/National Weather Service: Chris Landsea of NOAA noted that NWS has trimmed the North Pacific high seas forecast, discontinued the South Pacific forecast from Honolulu, and stopped 36-hour wind wave forecasts to align with organizational changes. A proposal will be issued for public comment on discontinuing all radio fax products due to outdated equipment and low usage, with a six-month notification period planned.

b. Committee on the Marine Transportation System: It was noted that CMTS was providing a detailed briefing to the Digital@Sea session later in the morning.

c. National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA): NGA is preparing to release S100/S124 products for testing and is managing increased data volume from commercial space launches, with ongoing discussions about data availability for military and commercial users.

d. NTSB: Nothing to report.

e. Transport Canada: Noting only the ongoing efforts at IMO MSC, IMO NCSR, and the ITU working party 5B coming up in the following weeks.

14. Review Summary Record of 8 January 2026 and Continuing Work List. The summary record of the previous Task Force meeting is posted on the Task Force website. The Continuing Work Program is appended to each agenda and updated as needed.

15. Next Meeting of the GMDSS Task Force: The Task Force will next meet virtually in September or October 2026 as schedules permit. The draft agenda for the next meeting will be posted in the What's New section of www.rtcn.org once it is available.

GMDSS TASK FORCE CONTINUING WORK LIST

6 May 2026

1. Monitor FCC continuing action to update GMDSS Rules (TF)
2. Recommend actions to reduce false alerts in GMDSS systems (TF)
3. Monitor Coast Guard Port State GMDSS inspection program (TF)
4. Monitor programs that broadcast MSI for GMDSS Standards conformance (TF)
5. Review GMDSS Internet Web Sites and update Task Force portion of NAVCEN site (TF)
6. Support SOLAS Working Group planning for IMO NCSR and Joint Experts meetings (TF)
7. Advocate voluntary carriage of VHF and EPIRB/PLBs by all vessels offshore (TF)
8. Monitor FCC policy and practice on MMSI assignments (TF)
9. Monitor non-GMDSS systems: AIS, LRIT, SSAS, VDES, VMS, & E-Navigation (TF)
10. Recommend means to improve Distress Alerts by Cell Phone & Internet (TF)
11. Advocate mandatory Distress Beacons on R/V more than 3 miles offshore (TF)
12. Advocate use of the Alaska AIS Monitor Network for VHF Distress Guard (TF)
13. Monitor Developments in Cybersecurity and educate membership (TF)
14. Advocate Earliest Fitting of AIS on Coast Guard Helicopters (TF)
15. Review GMDSS concepts and make modernization recommendations (MOD)
16. Monitor automatic response to test calls to USCG HF Commstas (CV)
17. Recommend Safety Radio and VMS Requirements for Small Fishing Vessels (CV)
18. Recommend Safety Radio & Navigation Requirements for Towing Vessels (CV)
19. Recommend Safety Radio & Navigation Outfit for Small Passenger Vessels (CV)
20. Advocate better FCC & USCG management of annual GMDSS inspections (CV)
21. Maintain Inspection Guidelines and Check Lists for selected vessel types (CV)
22. Advocate voluntary training programs for users of GMDSS systems (RV)
23. Encourage GMDSS handbooks and Internet and video training aids (RV)
24. Encourage users of VHF-DSC to Register for MMSI and connect GPS (RV)
25. Encourage Mfrs to upgrade readability of GMDSS items in equipment manuals (SA)
26. Recommend proper interconnection of GPS receivers with DSC Radios (SA)
27. Coordinate with USCG-NMC and FCC on training uniformity (TR)
28. Maintain GMDSS Question Pools for FCC and Coast Guard Examinations (TR)

Key to cognizant groups:

- (TF) Task Force
- (CV) Commercial Vessel Task Group
- (RV) Recreational Vessel Task Group
- (SA) Service Agents and Manufacturers Task Group
- (TR) Training Task Group
- (MOD) GMDSS Modernization Task Group

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