



# Marine Safety Information Bulletin

Commandant  
U.S. Coast Guard  
Inspections and Compliance Directorate  
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## VHF-DSC Radio Equipment Installation Requirement for Small Passenger and Commercial Fishing Vessels

**This supersedes MSIB No. 15-15 issued on December 15, 2015.** On January 20, 2015, the Coast Guard notified the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that it had published a Federal Register Notice declaring Sea Area A1 in certain areas off the coast of the United States.<sup>1</sup> This determination was made because the Coast Guard now has service in Sea Area A1 under its Rescue 21 Distress System coverage.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, and in accordance with the requirements of Title 47 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 80.905(a)(1), small passenger vessels that transport seven to twelve passengers for hire, and commercial fishing vessels of 300 gross tons and upward that operate within Sea Area A1, must have upgraded to VHF-DSC Class A radio equipment not later than January 20, 2016 to facilitate sending automatically formatted distress alerts instantly to rescue authorities.

Instant distress alerts, sent through a VHF-DSC capable marine radio, allow the Coast Guard to respond more quickly to an emergency if the alert contains position information. To include position information in a distress alert, the VHF-DSC radio should be properly connected to a GPS Receiver (electronic position fixing device) or have a VHF-DSC marine radio with integral GPS.

On January 19, 2016, the FCC released a [Public Notice](#) (DA 16-63) reminding operators of this new requirement and clarifying that Class A VHF-DSC marine radios satisfy this carriage requirement. The Notice also provides instructions on how to apply for an exemption to carry Class D VHF-DSC radio equipment in lieu of a Class A, an exemption request that must be approved by the FCC.

NOTE: The FCC defines a passenger-carrying vessel (or what is commonly referred to as a “small passenger vessel”) for the purposes of their regulations and issuance of FCC certificates differently than the Coast Guard. The FCC defines a small passenger vessel as a vessel that transports seven to twelve passengers for hire. Additionally, the FCC defines a “passenger ship” in 47 USC §153 as a ship that is certificated to carry more than twelve passengers, which is consistent with the SOLAS, Regulation 2 definition. In accordance with Subpart W of Title 47 CFR Part 80, all passenger ships – regardless of size – should be in compliance with the rules applicable to Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) for the carriage of ship radio equipment per § 80.1085. In this particular case, passenger ships must be provided with a VHF-DSC radio installation that meets the performance standards in that section of the regulations.

Due to differences and allowances by U.S. Coast Guard and FCC requirements, the Coast Guard has initiated negotiations for exemption allowances, and Officers in Charge, Marine Inspection (OCMI) may issue a deficiency (CG-835), for this Class A VHF-DSC carriage requirement, to a small passenger vessel owner or operator for 6 or 9 months, depending on the circumstances as noted in Commandant (CG-CVC) Policy Letter 15-06, Change 1 dated March 30, 2016.

Questions concerning FCC [Public Notice](#) (DA 15-466), issued in April 2015, and (DA 16-63) announcing this new requirement may be directed to Mr. Tim Maguire of the Mobility Division, Wireless Telecommunications Bureau at (202) 418-2155, or [Tim.Maguire@FCC.gov](mailto:Tim.Maguire@FCC.gov). Questions concerning this notice may be directed to the Office of Commercial Vessel Compliance, Commandant (CG-CVC) at 202-372-1251 or [CG-CVC-1@uscg.mil](mailto:CG-CVC-1@uscg.mil).

<sup>1</sup> See Declaration of Sea Area A1, 80 Fed. Reg. 2722, 2723 (2015).

<sup>2</sup> This determination was based upon the performance of the USCG Rescue 21 System, and in accordance with applicable provisions of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, 1974. Rescue 21 is the Coast Guard’s advanced command, control and direction-finding communications system that was created to better locate mariners in distress. It is comprised of strategically placed VHF Coast Stations that provide a continuous watch on DSC Channel 70 for receiving and responding to digital distress signals. In addition to declaring Sea Area A1 along the designated coasts, the USCG informed mariners that the Rescue 21 System also provides VHF Coast Stations along the Great Lakes, and that Rescue 21 facilities are being built along the Western Rivers and in Alaska.