



February 1, 2009: The Phaseout of 121.5 MHz Beacons for Satellite Distress Alerting

In October 2000 the International Cospas-Sarsat Program, announced at its 25th Council Session held in London, UK that it plans to terminate satellite processing of distress signals from 121.5 and 243 MHz emergency beacons on February 1, 2009. All mariners, aviators, and individuals using emergency beacons on those frequencies will need to switch to those operating on the newer, more reliable, digital 406 MHz frequency if they want to be detected by satellites.

The decision to stop satellite processing of 121.5 / 243 MHz signals is due to problems in this frequency band which inundate search and rescue authorities with poor accuracy and numerous false alerts, adversely impacting the effectiveness of lifesaving services. Although the 406 MHz beacons cost more at the moment, they provide search and rescue agencies with more reliable and complete information to do their job more efficiently and effectively. The Cospas-Sarsat Program made the decision to terminate 121.5/243 MHz satellite alerting services, in part, in response to guidance from the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). These two agencies of the United Nations are responsible for regulating the safety on international transits of ships and aircraft, respectively, and handling international standards and plans for maritime and aviation search and rescue. More than 180 nations are members of IMO and ICAO.

NOAA, along with the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Air Force, and NASA (the four Federal Agencies who manage, operate, and use the SARSAT system) are strongly advising users of 121.5/243 MHz beacons to make the switch to 406. Meanwhile, anyone planning to buy a new distress beacon may wish to take the Cospas-Sarsat decision into account.

Find Out More!

- NOAA has provided an excellent brochure regarding the Phaseout at: http://www.sarsat.noaa.gov/Phaseout_Brochure.pdf.
- Want to see how much better 406 MHz beacons are compared to the older, less accurate, and less reliable 121.5 MHz beacons are? A comparison is available at: <http://www.sarsat.noaa.gov/406vs121.pdf>.
- Read the Official U.S. Department of Commerce / NOAA Press Release announcing the Phaseout of 121.5 / 243 MHz beacons for satellite alerting at: <http://www.sarsat.noaa.gov/121phaseout.pdf>.
- Read the Official Notice to the public published in the U.S. Federal Register about the Phaseout of 121.5 / 243 MHz beacons for satellite alerting at: http://www.sarsat.noaa.gov/Phaseout_FedRegister.pdf.
- Want even more information? NOAA has a powerpoint presentation on the 121.5 MHz / 243 MHz Phaseout issue at: <http://www.sarsat.noaa.gov/121termination.ppt>.

