

Proper Use of VHF Recreational Marine Radio Channels

Boating Tips

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The primary purpose of a VHF marine is safety, your safety plus people on board, other boaters, and boats near you.

Channel 16 remains the primary channel to send and listen to distress broadcasts. The United States Coast Guard (USCG) requires all boaters to monitor 16 and when possible, give aid in a distress situation.

Several years ago the FCC adopted Channel 9 as the hailing frequency. They did so to open 16 because of increasing distress communication along with the hope of stopping casual conversations “walking on” distress calls. The success of that change continues to evolve and improve. You may want to keep in mind that Channel 16 is recorded by the USCG.

Today’s radios can dual monitor both 16 for emergencies and 9 for hailing. They also have a 16 button on the radio console and microphone. Use this button to switch to channel 16 quickly to broadcast especially a “Mayday” call when having or seeing an emergency.

The FCC identifies additional recreational marine channels for specific communications. For a boat to bridge FCC says to use, Channel 13. For USCG operations and with vessels in distress in addition to notices to mariners, use Channel 22. The FCC set Channels 68, 69, 71 and 72 for normal communication among boaters. An update in the last 12 months now permits marine VHF radio boat to land communication strictly of a marine nature. Examples are specific weather conditions at a marina, obstructions of a marina entrance or docking area, docking instructions from the marina docking assistant.

I suggest keeping a channel chart at the helm when on the water. This helps avoid using Channel 16 to request a bridge opening when bridges monitor Channel 13.

Today’s marine radios are rich in features. Two extremely important features are DSC, digital selective calling on channel 70 and GPS pairing. Boaters register their radio plus other information with the FCC. The FCC returns an MMSI (maritime mobile service identity) number a number identifying the boat’s radio, boat and owner. The boater enters their MMSI number into a specific memory location in the radio. When making a distress call DSC increases power, identifies the radio hence boat and owner.

By pairing the boat’s GPS with its VHF radio, when making distress calls using DSC the radio broadcasts the GPS coordinates. DSC paired with GPS dramatically reduces rescue time, therefore, improving the safety of you and everyone aboard.

Another helpful DSC feature is direct boat-to-boat calling. Program another boater's MMSI number into a specific location # in the DSC enabled radio like a speed dial number. Pressing that location number uses the DSC function to hail that boater directly. This keeps open channels 9 and 16, reducing "George, George, George, this is Henry, hey, George, you out there today?"

I strongly recommend learning all you can about the almost endless capabilities of your VHF recreational marine radio. These radio features when used save time plus dramatically improve communication and safety.

The Pamlico Sail & Power Squadron schedules boating education courses and seminars throughout the year. A VHF & VHF/DSC Marine Radio 2 hour seminar is scheduled for 9/23. To learn more email our Education Officer at psps@gmail.com or contact Linda at 252-964-3009.