



DSC and MMSI – For Vessel Examiners and Partners

The Coast Guard has asked us to add a critical discussion point with boaters during our Vessel Safety Checks (VSC's) about the importance of the Digital Selective Calling (DSC) distress calling feature found on most newer VHF radios. The DSC feature uses the associated Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI) number that the boat owner must register for. Many boat owners have NOT registered their MMSI through either BoatUS, America's Boating Club or the Federal Communication Commission (FCC). Failing to register to get the MMSI or updating their MMSI information can negatively impact the time needed for the Coast Guard and other emergency responders to find the boat in distress. So, what is the MMSI? It is a nine-digit number that uniquely identifies a boat, providing the vessel name and description, owner's name, emergency contact information, intended route and other radio equipment aboard.¹ An accurate MMSI database helps reduce the time needed to find vessels in distress².

Recent US Coast Guard data indicates that very few boaters realize that they need to have registered their DSC radio with a MMSI to use the DSC distress calling feature. To make matters worse, most boat owners also don't realize that they must transfer the MMSI upon the sale of the vessel to another owner. Vessels used on international voyages (or communicate with a foreign station) must receive their MMSI from the FCC. Only FCC issued MMSIs are registered on the international MMSI database. More information about proper MMSI registration control is available in the *Marine Safety Information Bulletin 09-23* at https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Portals/9/DCO%20Documents/5p/MSIB/2023/MSIB-09-23_Maritime_Mobile_Service_Identities_MMSIs.pdf?ver=LMOJZg8m0RkhqS4oujNm5w%3d%3d

For details on how to help recreational boaters, you can use the following job aid or refer to the US Coast Guard Navigation Center at <https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/maritime-mobile-service-identity>

I am a:	I want to:	What's Next:	Links:
Recreational Boater <link to page 2> voluntary carriage of AIS with MMSI, vessel under 65'	Use my boat in US waters only	Contact an approved organization to register an MMSI number	Shine Micro MMSI Vessel Registration BOAT US US Power Squadron
	Use my boat in both US and International waters	Contact the FCC for a Ship Station License (which will include an MMSI number)	FCC Ship Station Licensing
	Sell my boat and release my MMSI number to the new owner	Contact the MMSI Issuer to arrange release. Don't know who that is?	Click here for a pdf of MMSI allotments.
	Buy a boat and transfer the existing MMSI registration to me	Contact the MMSI Issuer to arrange registration update. Don't know who that is?	Click here for a pdf of MMSI allotments.
	Get an MMSI number for my marine VHF handheld, to use on multiple	Contact an approved organization to register an MMSI number for each radio	Shine Micro MMSI Handheld Registration FCC MMSI Handheld Registration
Commercial Vessel Owner <link to page 3> (Or recreational vessel over 65') mandatory carriage of AIS with MMSI	Use my boat in US waters only	Contact the FCC for a Ship Station License (which will include an MMSI number)	FCC Ship Station Licensing
	Use my boat in both US and International waters	Contact the FCC for a Ship Station License (which will include an MMSI number)	FCC Ship Station Licensing
	Sell my boat and release my MMSI number to the new owner	Contact the MMSI Issuer to arrange release. Don't know who that is?	Click here for a pdf of MMSI allotments.
	Buy a boat and transfer the existing MMSI registration to me	Contact the MMSI Issuer to arrange registration update. Don't know who that is?	Click here for a pdf of MMSI allotments.
Federal Vessel Operator <Link to page 4>	Obtain or transfer an MMSI	Contact your agency's Spectrum Management office.	Click here for a listing of agency IRAC member contacts

Source: MMSI Decision Matrix, US Coast Guard Navigation Center webpage: <https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/maritime-mobile-service-identity>; accessed 5 July 2023.

¹ US Coast Guard Navigation Center webpage: <https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/maritime-mobile-service-identity>; accessed 5 July 2023.

² Ibid



FAQ: MMSI – Maritime Mobile Service Identity. (How to Register- See Front Side); DSC- Digital Selective Calling

What is Coast Guard Rescue 21?

The Rescue 21, the Coast Guard's advanced command, control, and direction-finding communications system, was created to better locate mariners in distress and save lives and property at sea and on navigable rivers.

How does the rescue 21 system reduce the amount of time between a call for help and the actual rescue?

Rescue 21 combines state-of-the-art command, control and emergency response using both automated and human-assisted communications, and computer and radio direction-finding systems. This system significantly reduces response-and-search time while extending coverage out to a minimum of 20 miles from shore.

What is DSC on a VHF radio?

This service, called digital selective calling (DSC), allows mariners to instantly send an automatically formatted distress alert to the Coast Guard or other rescue authority anywhere in the world.

Do all VHF radios have GPS?

Some VHF radios have a built-in GPS receiver (but not always). Often, a GPS device comes complete with other capabilities such as fish finders and chart plotters. If the device offers the ability for both GPS and VHF radio, this is an excellent way to cut down on the amount of electronics mounted on your boat.

How many nautical miles can VHF go?

VHF radio can range up to 30 nautical miles if the antenna is high enough. However, the most critical function of a Marine VHF Radio is that it is beneficial when sending distress signals across the channels to coast guards and other ships and boats in the periphery.

Do I need GPS on my VHF radio?

To ensure the Coast Guard can find you quickly, attach a GPS receiver to your VHF radio. The GPS must have NMEA 0183 outputs to share location information with your DSC equipped VHF Radio.

What do the MMSI numbers mean?

Maritime Mobile Service Identities (MMSIs) are nine-digit numbers used by maritime digital selective calling (DSC), automatic identification systems (AIS) and certain other equipment to uniquely identify a ship or a coast radio station.

What is the standard MMSI number?

An MMSI comprises a series of nine digits, consisting of three Maritime Identification Digits (country-codes), concatenated with a specific identifier. Whenever an object is re-flagged, a new MMSI must be assigned.

What do the first three digits of a vessel's MMSI indicate?

All vessel MMSI numbers are using the format MIDXXXXXX. The first three digits are called MID (Maritime Identification Digits) and represent the nationality (see the ITU Table of Maritime Identification Digits: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-R/terrestrial/fmd/Pages/mid.aspx>).

Does MMSI stay with the boat?

Licenses are non-transferable as a call sign and MMSI number stays with a vessel for life. You will therefore need to apply for a new license in your name, retaining the call sign and MMSI number of the vessel.

Can two radios have the same MMSI number?

Every vessel operating a VHF radio, or an AIS transceiver will need a unique Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI) number. If a vessel has multiple VHF and/or AIS devices, only one MMSI number will be needed and entered into each unit. This number is associated to the vessel rather than the devices.

Can you change MMSI number on VHF?

The number can only be entered into the radio once and is an FCC regulation. If the MMSI number was entered incorrectly or changed for any reason, the radio will require reprogramming that must be completed by an authorized service center or returned to Garmin for reprogramming.

Will a VHF work without MMSI number?

About Marine Handheld VHF

A marine radio's DSC capability is not able to be used without programming an MMSI into the radio prior to use.

How much does it cost to get MMSI from FCC or Boat US?

NOTE: The FCC currently charges \$200+ for a ten-year SA ship station license. Once you have completed the license application, it takes about 2 days for the FCC to issue the license. Your license will include a call sign and MMSI for your vessel.

-or-

Forgot your membership number? xClose MMSI is free to BoatUS Members but can also be obtained by non-members for a fee of \$25.00.