



Non – Pyrotechnic Flares

Notice to all Ship Owners, Ship Operators, Port Operators, Harbour Masters, Yacht Skippers, Pleasure Vessel Users, Masters and owners of vessels operating on Inland Waterways, Fishing Vessel Skippers and Seafarers

This MIN expires 30 June 2015

Summary

Latest advice to mariners for distress equipment to be used in an emergency.

1. Background

The international regulations for the Prevention of Collisions at Sea (COLREGS) apply to all vessels at sea and by special application to vessels on inland waters. Annex IV of these regulations sets out the signals used to indicate if a vessel is in distress and in need of immediate assistance. The equipment needed to make some of these signals (e.g. pyrotechnics) is required to be carried on all seagoing commercial vessels, and most non-seagoing commercial vessels. They are also required to be carried on all pleasure vessels of 13.7 metres in length and over. The Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) Convention describes the standards that distress equipment must meet and whilst not mandatory for all pleasure vessels it follows that to avoid confusion similar standards need to be adopted.

The MCA is aware of the development and marketing of hand-held non-pyrotechnic devices offered as alternatives to pyrotechnic flares; these will be referred to in this document as Electronic Visual Distress Signals (EVDS). Whilst noting the likely benefits of these such as cost, safety and ease of disposal, from a practical perspective the signal produced by these devices is different to that produced by a hand-held pyrotechnic flare and may not be recognised as a distress signal. This may have potentially fatal consequences.

Current Position

To be effective, distress signals must be internationally recognised and whilst acknowledging the potential benefits of EVDS the MCA considers that a change would be needed to Annex IV of the COLREGS to permit these devices full recognition as distress signals.

Work has commenced in this area, the US Coast Guard for example has commissioned the international standards organisation, Radio Technical Commission for Maritime Services



(RTCM), to research the effectiveness of EVDS. The MCA positively supports this initiative, through monitoring progress, contributing views, and supporting this work in the appropriate international fora. The ultimate aim is to work towards recognition of these devices, if they are shown to be fit for purpose, by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and a subsequent change to COLREGS Annex IV regulations.

When the US research is concluded further information on the current position will be published.

Advice for Mariners

Where the carriage of flares is mandatory, hand-held distress flares must meet the requirements of the Marine Equipment Directive which incorporates European and IMO requirements. None of the EVDS on the market that we are aware of, currently meet the light intensity required by the IMO Life Saving Appliance Code and as such do not conform to the Directive. This means that they cannot be carried as a substitute for pyrotechnic flares on vessels to which mandatory carriage applies.

Where carriage of flares is non-mandatory and due to the possibility that EVDS may not be recognised internationally as a distress signal, the MCA advises that EVDS, for the time being, should not be carried as a substitute for conventional pyrotechnic flares. However, for all pleasure vessels, seagoing commercial vessels, and most non-seagoing commercial vessels EVDS may be carried and used as a locating device, though their limitations should be recognised and all parties involved made aware of the type of signal being generated.

More Information

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