

NOAA SARSAT: A spike in false alerts from EMERGENCY POSITION INDICATING RADIO BEACON caused by improper disposal

Suitland, Md., Dec. 20 – NOAA SARSAT officials say a recent jump in the number of false alerts from Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRBs), which are carried on boats and ships, is caused by improper disposal.

According to officials, sometimes owners of old EPIRBs will toss them into the trash, and they will eventually wind up a dumpster or landfill. “This is a huge problem, because EPIRBs are designed to operate automatically when in water, and they often come in contact with rainwater in a dumpster or landfill and transmit a false alert,” said Chris O’Connors, program manager for NOAA SARSAT.

A recent case in New Smyrna, Fla., caused the U.S. Coast Guard to search for two hours before an EPIRB was found in a trash bin at a marina.

“These false alerts waste the precious time and resources of the Coast Guard that should be used for real emergencies,” O’Connors said.

According to the latest study in 2009, the Coast Guard spent \$4.5 million responding to false alerts. Though only a fraction of these responses were a result of improper disposal of EPIRBs, O’Connors said this is easiest to prevent. Most importantly, these false alerts put Search and Rescue (SAR) crews at risk, make SAR assets less available for actual distress, and fatigues the SAR system.

The EPIRBs are designed for demanding conditions and don’t require much maintenance. They are easy to maintain that an owner can almost forget that it is aboard. It takes years for an EPIRB to reach the end of its service life but, when it does, owners are sometimes at a loss for how to dispose of it.

In the next few years, the NOAA SARSAT Program believes these incidents are likely to increase. The SARSAT Program has already observed a 55 percent hike in these instances in the past three years from 110 cases in 2010 to 178 cases in 2012.

This increase may be for several reasons. Many boat owners may find it more economical to buy newer EPIRBs, rather than replace batteries in their old one. Some owners may favor replacing older EPIRBs with newer models that have GPS capability. In addition, studies are currently underway to provide a new generation of beacons with increased capability. These new beacons will have functions that support special features that will entice EPIRB owners to replace their older models.

O’Connors added: “With more and more EPIRBs being disposed of, it is more important than ever to ensure they are disposed of properly.”

Proper EPIRB disposal includes removing the battery before disposal or recycling.

Check with your EPIRB owner's manual or call the manufacturer for instructions on removal. If you need assistance, there are support facilities all over the country for EPIRB manufacturers, usually the same place to get your EPIRB battery replaced. You can reach out to these support facilities for help and advice.