Proposed changes to VHF maritime mobile channel arrangements

Consultation paper

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[Executive summary 1](#_Toc145347975)

[Issues for comment 2](#_Toc145347976)

[Consultation questions 2](#_Toc145347977)

[Introduction 3](#_Toc145347978)

[Maritime radio regulatory arrangements 3](#_Toc145347979)

[Proposal to amend maritime instruments 5](#_Toc145347980)

[WRC-19 outcomes 5](#_Toc145347981)

[Support additional satellite systems to the GMDSS 6](#_Toc145347982)

[Facilitate use of AMRDs to protect the GMDSS and AIS 6](#_Toc145347983)

[Enable a new VDES satellite component 8](#_Toc145347984)

[Proposed amendments to maritime instruments 9](#_Toc145347985)

[Next steps 11](#_Toc145347986)

[Sunsetting of maritime radio legislative instruments 11](#_Toc145347987)

[Invitation to comment 12](#_Toc145347988)

[Making a submission 12](#_Toc145347989)

Executive summary

In the [Five-year spectrum outlook 2022–27](https://www.acma.gov.au/publications/2022-09/plan/five-year-spectrum-outlook-2022-27), the ACMA indicated that it would consult on proposed amendments to the Very High Frequency (VHF) maritime mobile channel arrangements set out in our legislative instruments.

Following the most recent World Radiocommunications Conference (WRC) in 2019 (WRC-19), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) updated Appendix 18 (REV.WRC-19)—*Table of Transmitting frequencies in the VHF maritime mobile band* (Appendix 18) and Appendix 15 (REV.WRC-19)—*Frequencies for distress and safety communications for the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System* (Appendix 15). Australia signed the Final Acts of WRC-19 and subsequently ratified the treaty implementing the revisions to the ITU Radio Regulations which were agreed at WRC‑19.

The [Australian Radiofrequency Spectrum Plan 2021](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2021L00617) (the Spectrum Plan) reflects the positions agreed to by Australia at WRC‑19 and subsequently ratified.

We have now reviewed the maritime legislative framework to identify changes that are required to other instruments to implement the treaty-level changes agreed to at WRC‑19.

We have developed a proposal to amend 3 maritime legislative instruments to incorporate these changes, which would also be consistent with recent updates made by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to the [International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea](https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-for-the-Safety-of-Life-at-Sea-(SOLAS),-1974.aspx) (the SOLAS Convention).

We are also proposing other minor updates to the instruments to remove reference to obsolete ship station terminal equipment, reflect the wording of the ITU Radio Regulations, and clarify notes and table headings.

We are now consulting with interested stakeholders on the proposed amendments to the [Radiocommunications Maritime Ship Station – 27 MHz and VHF) Class Licence 2015](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2021C00649) (Maritime 27 MHz and VHF Class Licence), the [Radiocommunications Licence Conditions (Maritime Ship Licence) Determination 2015](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2019C00504) (Maritime Ship Licence LCD), and the [Radiocommunications Licence Conditions (Maritime Coast Licence) Determination 2015](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2019C00509) (Maritime Coast Licence LCD).

The key changes we are proposing will:

* recognise additional satellite systems recognised by the IMO for the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS)
* facilitate the use of autonomous maritime radio devices (AMRDs)
* enable a new VHF data exchange system (VDES) satellite component.

# Issues for comment

The ACMA invites comments on the questions featured throughout this paper. For ease of reference, the questions are listed below.

We also welcome feedback from stakeholders on the specific changes reflected in the draft amendment instrument.

## Consultation questions

What are your views on our proposal to amend the Maritime Ship Licence LCD to replace references to ‘Inmarsat’ with ‘recognised mobile satellite service’?

What are your views on our proposal to authorise the operation of AMRDs under the Maritime 27 MHz and VHF Class Licence and regulate their operation under the Maritime Ship Licence LCD?

Are there other scenarios where AMRD Group A stations could be used that would be consistent with the IMO’s designation for MOB purposes?

For what purposes are AMRD Group B stations being used? Please provide examples and information on how they operate.

Are there purposes, other than those described in ITU-R M.2135-1, that AMRD Group B stations could be used for? Please provide examples and information on how they would operate.

What are your views on our proposed changes to enable a new VDES satellite component?

# Introduction

Maritime radio in Australia provides search and rescue assistance to ships in distress while also providing commercial and recreational communications for marine users. Most of the spectrum allocations in the maritime mobile service are in the High Frequency (HF) and VHF maritime mobile bands.

The international framework for maritime radio is established through the [ITU Radio Regulations](https://www.itu.int/pub/R-REG-RR) and the SOLAS Convention. For most countries, including Australia, spectrum and frequency planning is informed by participation in the ITU. The frequency allocations for the maritime mobile bands are detailed in [Article 5 of the ITU Radio Regulations](https://life.itu.int/radioclub/rr/art05.htm). Appendix 18 provides the source for the channel structure of the VHF maritime mobile band, defines the channel numbering and specifies the permitted use for each maritime VHF channel on an international basis. Appendix 15 sets out the frequencies and permitted uses for distress and safety communications for the GMDSS.

Australia is a signatory to the Constitution and Convention of the ITU. The ITU Radio Regulations are revised by the ITU WRCs, normally held every 4 years, and member states subsequently take binding treaty action to give effect to the changes to the ITU Radio Regulations. The ACMA gives effect to ITU Radio Regulations requirements through a number of domestic licensing and planning instruments, including apparatus licence condition determinations and class licences.

The IMO, of which Australia is a member state, is the United Nations agency with responsibility for the safety and security of shipping and the prevention of marine pollution by ships. The IMO implements its responsibility for the safety of shipping through the SOLAS Convention. The SOLAS Convention is an international maritime treaty that sets minimum safety standards in the construction, equipment and operation of merchant ships. Australia is also a signatory to the SOLAS Convention.

## Maritime radio regulatory arrangements

As Australia’s spectrum regulator, the ACMA manages the spectrum in accordance with the [Radiocommunications Act 1992](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Series/C2004A04465/) (the Act), which sets out objectives for spectrum management using a range of regulatory tools. These include powers relating to frequency planning, licensing and technical standards.

The Spectrum Plan, which is made by the ACMA, divides the Australian radiofrequency spectrum into a number of frequency bands and specifies the general purposes for which each of the bands may be used.

The ACMA manages the allocation of the VHF marine radio channels and specifies uses via several legislative instruments, policy documents and apparatus licences. In addition to the Spectrum Plan, the ACMA specifies the permitted uses and conditions applicable to the use of the VHF maritime mobile spectrum in the following legislative instruments and administrative band plan:

* [Maritime 27 MHz and VHF Class Licence](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2021C00649)
* [Maritime Ship Licence LCD](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2019C00504)
* Maritime Coast Licence LCD
* [Radiocommunications Licence Conditions (Major Coast Receive Licence) Determination 2015)](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2017C00901)
* [RALI: MS42 – Frequency Plan for the VHF Bands 70 – 85.5 MHz and 148 – 174 MHz](https://www.acma.gov.au/publications/2019-11/rules/rali-ms42-vhf-mid-and-high-plans) (RALI MS42).

A number of maritime terms are also defined in the [Radiocommunications (Interpretation) Determination 2015](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2021C00635).

Collectively, these legislative instruments and policy document ensure that maritime ship stations and coast stations use the appropriate maritime frequencies, transmitter output power and protocols to minimise the potential for interference to maritime radio operation.

The VHF maritime mobile band consists of 59 channels operating in the frequency range 156.000 MHz to 162.050 MHz, apart from those portions within this frequency range that are allocated to the land mobile service. These frequency ranges are derived from RALI MS42 when read together with the ITU Appendix 18.

The channels are a mix of duplex and simplex channels with a 25 kHz channel spacing. VHF maritime radios mostly use simplex transmission, where communications can only take place in one direction at a time. However, within the VHF maritime mobile band, there are several duplex transmission channels where communication can take place in both directions simultaneously when equipment at both ends allows it. Each duplex channel has 2 frequencies assigned to it.

The maritime radio use of these bands is extremely broad and ranges from ship‑to‑ship, ship-to-satellite, ship-to-shore and on-board communications.

# Proposal to amend maritime instruments

We have reviewed our maritime licensing arrangements to identify the changes required to implement the treaty-level changes agreed to at WRC-19 and to align with the Spectrum Plan. Our review found that amendments are required to 3 maritime instruments: the Maritime 27 MHz and VHF Class Licence, the Maritime Ship Licence LCD, and the Maritime Coast Licence LCD.

We also consulted with the Australian Maritime Safety Agency (AMSA) on our proposed amendments. AMSA suggested changes to technical conditions, updates to definitions to harmonise the Australian arrangements with the SOLAS Convention, and other minor updates to improve the instruments. We have incorporated AMSA’s suggestions into the draft amendment instruments.

Our proposal will bring into line Australian maritime radio licensing requirements into line with agreed international arrangements, provide greater protection for safety of life services in the VHF maritime radiofrequency channels and provide maritime radio operators with the option of using new satellite technologies.

## WRC-19 outcomes

Key outcomes from the WRC-19 that were agreed to by Australia are:

Agenda Item 1.8 (Issue B): recognition of additional satellite systems to the GMDSS, in accordance with Resolution 359 (WRC-15).[[1]](#footnote-2) Iridium Satellite LLC was nominated and recognised by the IMO to provide GMDSS.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Agenda Item 1.9.1: regulatory changes to facilitate AMRD, including designating channels for AMRD Group A and B, to protect the GMDSS and automatic identification system (AIS), in accordance with Resolution 362 (WRC-15).[[3]](#footnote-4)

Agenda Item 1.9.2: regulatory changes to enable a new VDES satellite component, while ensuring that this component will not degrade the current terrestrial VDES components, application specific messages and AIS operations and not impose any additional constraints on existing services in these and adjacent frequency bands, in accordance with Resolution 360 (Rev.WRC‑15).[[4]](#footnote-5)

At the conclusion of WRC-19, Australia signed the Final Acts of the conference, which made revisions to the 2015 ITU Radio Regulations, a treaty-level document. Following consideration by the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, Australia ratified the treaty on 28 March 2022.[[5]](#footnote-6)

The ACMA’s legislative instruments about VHF maritime mobile use are broadly aligned with the ITU requirements as set out in Appendix 18. However, there are instances where variations exist due to national planning requirements.

The ACMA typically updates the Spectrum Plan following each WRC. In May 2021, the ACMA remade the Spectrum Plan to include the positions agreed to by Australia on maritime issues discussed at WRC-19.

The Spectrum Plan includes a secondary allocation to the maritime mobile-satellite service (MMSS) in the 157.1875–157.3375 MHz frequency band satellite systems to enable a new VDES satellite component (as an outcome of WRC-19 Agenda Item 1.9.2). The Spectrum Plan also deals with the outcome of Agenda Item 1.8 (Issue B), which included modifications to footnote 372, and the table of frequency band allocations was updated to include a primary MMSS allocation in the space-to-Earth direction.

## Support additional satellite systems to the GMDSS

We are proposing changes to the Maritime Ship Licence LCD to ensure any satellite systems recognised by the IMO for the GMDSS can use particular channels.

Since the IMO adopted the worldwide system for communication of emergency information in 1988, Inmarsat has been the only recognised provider of satellite communication services for the GMDSS. In 2018, the IMO also recognised Iridium as a provider of such services.

The IMO made changes to the SOLAS Convention that will come into effect on 1 January 2024. These changes include: modernising the GMDSS to contain more generic requirements independent of specific service providers; and removing carriage requirements for obsolete systems. These issues were discussed under Agenda Item 1.8 (Issue B) at WRC-19.

The IMO’s changes included updates to definitions used in the SOLAS Convention. Provider-specific terms have been replaced with more generic terms, such as ‘recognised mobile satellite service’ to replace references to ‘Inmarsat’. We are proposing to also adopt this approach in our proposed amendments, to enable future services recognised by the IMO for use in the GMDSS to be authorised in Australia without the need for further regulatory changes.

**Consultation question 1:**

What are your views on our proposal to amend the Maritime Ship Licence LCD to replace references to ‘Inmarsat’ with ‘recognised mobile satellite service’?

## Facilitate use of AMRDs to protect the GMDSS and AIS

We are proposing changes to the Maritime 27 MHz and VHF Class Licence and the Maritime Ship Licence LCD to facilitate the use of AMRDs under our licensing arrangements. The proposed changes to provide for AMRDs includes new definitions, designation of channels for use, and associated technical conditions.

The technical and operational characteristics of AMRDs are set out in the ITU Recommendation ITU-R M.2135-1, which describes an AMRD as “a station in the maritime mobile service which is mobile, operates at sea and transmits independently of a ship station or a coast station, which may also be temporarily moored”.

AMRDs are used for various purposes, including to receive transmissions from, another device attached to a person or object in the water. The ITU-R M.2135-1 categorises AMRDs into two groups:

Group A—AMRDs that enhance the safety of navigation

Group B—AMRDs that do not enhance the safety of navigation.

### AMRD Group A

The IMO is the responsible organisation for the designation of AMRD Group A, which are stations that are used for the sole purpose of enhancing the safety of navigation. AMRD Group A stations are subject to the IMO SOLAS requirements for presentation of information to navigators of vessels.

The IMO has designated two purposes for the use of AMRD Group A:

man-overboard (MOB) to assist in localised rescue of a person who has fallen off a ship

mobile aid to navigation (MAtoN) to assist the navigator of a vessel in reducing the risk of collisions, and to track and report on the movement of vessels nearby.

#### MOB purposes

An AMRD Group A station communicates with an MOB transmitter that is designed to locate an individual crew member or passenger, in the event that the person has fallen overboard. The MOB transmitter is installed on a life-jacket and activates automatically on inflation to communicate with an AIS station onboard the vessel. MOB transmitters use VHF digital selective calling (DSC) Class M and are combined with AIS[[6]](#footnote-7) technology. These devices are not monitored by shore stations in Australia.

For the purposes of MOB, an MOB transmitter operates as a locating aid, on the 156.525 MHz frequency band, as part of a maritime survivor locating system. The operation of an MOB transmitter is currently authorised under the [Radiocommunications (Emergency Locating Devices) Class Licence 2016](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2021C00646), as long as the operator complies with the conditions of the class licence.

We are not proposing to make further changes to the licensing arrangements for MOB transmitters that communicate with AMRD Group A stations.

#### MAToN purposes

AMRD Group A stations are part of a vessel’s navigation safety system. ITU-R M.2135-1 recommends that MAToN devices should be operated by the responsible authority of an administration. AMSA will investigate options, in consultation with search and rescue authorities, ports and State marine authorities, for authorisation of MAToN devices as it is responsible for authorisation of non-shipborne AIS transmissions in Australia.

### AMRD Group B

AMRD Group B are devices that do not enhance the safety of navigation—they deliver signals or information that do not concern the navigation of a vessel or do not complement vessel traffic safety in waterways. Group B devices may implement AIS technology or technology other than AIS. Technology other than AIS may be implemented only on an experimental basis, and operational use of such devices is not addressed in the ITU Radio Regulations.

AMRD Group B stations can be used for purposes other than those designated by the IMO for AMRD Group A. Table 8 of ITU-R M.2135-1 lists the types of AMRD Group B stations and describes the purposes for which they may be used. The purposes include fishnet marker, diver tracker and barge locator.

We understand that, for these purposes, AMRD Group B stations may operate in a similar manner as AMRD Group A stations for MOB purposes. That is, they would receive transmissions from a marker or tracking transmitter attached to a person or an object in the water.

We are seeking information about use-cases for AMRD Group B stations and how they operate. Specifically, we are interested in understanding the purposes AMRD Group B stations are currently being used for. We are also seeking input on what purposes AMRD Group B stations may be used for in the future.

Following consideration of feedback from consultation, we will investigate options under our licensing arrangements, for authorising the operation of transmitters that may be used to communicate with AMRD Group B stations.

**Consultation question 2:**

What are your views on our proposal to authorise the operation of AMRDs under the Maritime 27 MHz and VHF Class Licence and regulate their operation under the Maritime Ship Licence LCD?

**Consultation question 3:**Are there other scenarios where AMRD Group A stations could be used that would be consistent with the IMO’s designation for MOB purposes?

**Consultation question 4:**For what purposes are AMRD Group B stations currently being used? Please provide examples and information on how they operate.

**Consultation question 5:**Are there purposes, other than those described in the ITU-R M.2135-1, that AMRD Group B stations could be used for? Please provide examples and information on how they would operate.

## Enable a new VDES satellite component

We are proposing changes to the Maritime 27 MHz and VHF Class Licence, the Maritime Ship Licence LCD and the Maritime Coast Licence LCD to enable a new VDES satellite component.

VDES provides a variety of means for the exchange of data between maritime stations, ship-to-ship, ship-to-shore, shore-to ship, ship-to-satellite and satellite‑to‑ship. The technical characteristics of VDES are contained in the latest version of Recommendation ITU-R M.2092. VDES integrates the functions of the AIS, including Application Specific Messages, and a protocol for VHF Data Exchange (VDE).

VDE consists of a terrestrial and a satellite component aiming at worldwide coverage.

**Consultation question 6:**

What are your views on our proposed changes to enable a new VDES satellite component?

# Proposed amendments to maritime instruments

Our proposals harmonise Australian licensing requirements with agreed international arrangements, provide greater protection for safety of life services in the maritime VHF radiofrequency channels and provide marine radio operators with the option of using the new technologies.

We are consulting on the draft Radiocommunications (Maritime Licensing) Amendment Instrument 2024 (No.1) (draft amendment instrument). You can find the draft amendment instrument in the key documents section of this consultation. The draft amendment instrument reflects the specific changes we are proposing to the Maritime Ship 27 MHz and VHF Class Licence, the Maritime Ship Licence LCD and the Maritime Coast Licence LCD.

A summary of the proposed changes is also set out below.

The proposed amendments to the Maritime 27 MHz and VHF Class Licence will:

Facilitate the use of new and existing AMRDs and designate channels for AMRD Group A and AMRD Group B by:

adding definitions for AMRDs, AMRD Group A and AMRD Group B, based on ITU-R M.2135-1

making changes to Schedule 2, Part 2.2 “Distress, urgency, safety and calling communications” table to allow communication with AMRD Group A and designate channels 70, AIS 1 and AIS 2

making changes to Schedule 2, Part 2.2 “Distress, urgency, safety and calling communications” table to allow communication with AMRD Group B; designate channel 2006 with maximum transmitter output power of 100mW EIRP, and add limitations of AIS only and the antenna height must not exceed 1 metre above the surface of the sea.

Enable the use of a new VDES satellite component that is limited to non‑geosynchronous orbit (non-GSO) satellite systems, operating in accordance with Appendix 18, by:

replacing the current “Schedule 2, Part 2.11 VHF Data Exchange System (VDES)” with a new table that incorporates changes to the current frequency bands, channels, purpose and limitations for the new VDES satellite component

replacing the notes under the VDES table with information in the “purpose” column of the table and a new section on channel use.

The proposed amendments to the Maritime Ship Licence LCD will:

Recognise additional satellite systems for the GMDSS by:

removing the definition of ‘Inmarsat’ and all references to Inmarsat, including removal of the definition of ‘Enhanced Group Calling’

adding a definition for ‘general transmission’, to replace reference to Inmarsat and be consistent with the SOLAS Convention

adding a definition of ‘recognised mobile satellite service’ to recognise Iridium to provide GMDSS MMSS and to enable recognition of future satellite systems licensed in Australia

adding an additional frequency band of 1621.35 –1626.5 MHz in Schedule 2, Part 2 “VHF and UHF communications for distress, urgency, safety or calling” table to enable the use of recognised mobile satellite service provider systems to communicate with earth stations and maritime ship stations for GMDSS.

Facilitate the use of new and existing AMRDs and designate channels for AMRD Group A and AMRD Group B by:

adding definitions for AMRDs, AMRD Group A and AMRD Group B, based on ITU-R Recommendation M.2135-1

making changes to Schedule 2, Part 2 “VHF and UHF communications for distress, urgency, safety or calling” table to allow communication with AMRD Group A and designate channels 70, AIS 1 and AIS 2

making changes to Schedule 2, Part 2 “VHF and UHF communications for distress, urgency, safety or calling” table to allow communication with AMRD Group B; designate channel 2006 with maximum transmitter output power of 100mW EIRP and limitation that the antenna height must not exceed 1 metre above the surface of the sea.

Enable the use of a new VDES satellite component that is limited to non-GSO satellite systems, operating in accordance with Appendix 18, by:

replacing the current “Schedule 2, Part 12 VHF Data Exchange System (VDES)” with a new table that incorporates changes to the current frequency bands, channels, purpose and limitations for the new VDES satellite component

replacing the notes under the VDES table with information in the “purpose” column of the table and a new section on channel use.

Replace Schedule 2, Part 3, item 350 to remove references to obsolete ship station terminal types A, B and M previously operated by Inmarsat that are no longer in operation.

Repeal Item 356 from “Schedule 2 Part 3 Public correspondence by radiotelephony”, which duplicates Item 350.

The proposed amendments to the Maritime Coast Licence LCD will:

Enable the use of a new VDES satellite component that is limited to non-GSO satellite systems, operating in accordance with Appendix 18, by:

adding a new section 6.15 to allow ship station Class B non assigned stations to use the new VDES satellite component

adding a new table in Schedule 9 that sets out the technical conditions, such as frequency bands, channels and maximum transmitter power output, for the new VDES satellite component

adding a new section under the VDES table on channel use.

The draft amendment instrument also propose minor updates to the 3 instruments to reflect the wording of ITU Radio Regulations, and clarify notes and table headings.

# Next steps

Subject to the outcomes of this consultation, the ACMA intends to implement the proposed amendments to the Maritime 27 MHz and VHF Class Licence, Maritime Ship Licence LCD and Maritime Coast Licence LCD in Q1 2024 to implement the key outcomes agreed to by Australia from WRC‑19.

The ACMA will consider feedback from stakeholders to determine whether further changes are required to authorise MOB transmitters used with AMRD Group A stations, and to identify the most appropriate licensing option to authorise transmitters used with AMRD Group B stations. We will update stakeholders on the timing for making these changes in Q1 2024.

## Sunsetting of maritime radio legislative instruments

Under the Legislation Act 2003, most legislative instruments are automatically repealed after 10 years. The purpose of sunsetting is to ensure that legislative instruments are kept up-to-date and only remain in force as long as is necessary.

The ACMA’s maritime radio legislative instruments are due to sunset in April and October 2025. We expect that these instruments will continue to be required after their respective sunset dates, and we intend to remake them before April 2025. As part of this process, we will consider whether updates to the instruments are required, including requests made by maritime stakeholders and amendments arising from the upcoming WRC in late 2023. A further consultation process will occur closer to that time.

# Invitation to comment

## Making a submission

We invite comments on the issues set out in this consultation paper.

[Online submissions](https://www.acma.gov.au/have-your-say) can be made by uploading a document. Submissions in PDF, Microsoft Word or Rich Text Format are preferred.

Submissions by post can be sent to:

The Manager

Spectrum Licensing Policy Section

Australian Communications and Media Authority

PO Box 13112 Law Courts

Melbourne VIC 8010

The closing date for submissions is COB, **Friday 3 November 2023**.

Consultation enquiries can be emailed to [SLPSConsultations@acma.gov.au](mailto:SLPSConsultations@acma.gov.au).

#### Publication of submissions

We publish submissions on our website, including personal information (such as names and contact details), except for information that you have claimed (and we have accepted) is confidential.

Confidential information will not be published or otherwise released unless required or authorised by law.

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View information about our policy on the [publication of submissions](https://www.acma.gov.au/publication-submissions), including collection of personal information during consultation and how we handle that information.

Information on the *Privacy Act 1988,* how to access or correct personal information, how to make a privacy complaint and how we will deal with any complaints, is available in our [privacy policy](https://www.acma.gov.au/privacy-policy).

1. Detailed at <https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-r/oth/0c/0a/R0C0A00000C0008PDFE.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The ACMA’s instruments currently specify Inmarsat as the only satellite system in the GMDSS. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Detailed at <https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-r/oth/0c/0a/R0C0A00000C0009PDFE.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Detailed at <https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-r/oth/0c/0a/R0C0A00000C0010PDFE.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Detailed at <https://www.info.dfat.gov.au/Info/Treaties/treaties.nsf/3328431b218f8d59ca256ae1000029b8/32ade3c19f298695ca258621007fde49?OpenDocument> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. These devices should operate in accordance with Recommendations ITU-R M.493, ITU-R M.541 and ITU-R M.1371. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)