Australian Government
Australian Maritime Safety Authority

MARINE NOTICE

Marine Notice 12/2012

Disabling the automatic channel switching function on VHF marine radios with Digital Selective Calling (DSC) capability

The purposes of this Marine Notice are to:

1) provide information to ship owners and operators about the risk of automatic VHF channel switching whenever critical operations are being carried out; and
2) recommend inclusion of disabling and re-enabling procedures in the ship's bridge procedures, if the ship's VHF equipment has a disable function for automatic channel switching.

Background

Automatic channel switching to VHF Channel 16, on receipt of a Distress Alert, or Urgency/Safety Announcement or other calls, is a function of VHF DSC equipment.

Unless the function is disabled, a vessel's radio channel may automatically switch away from the working channel at an inopportune moment, in response to an incoming Distress Alert or Distress Acknowledgement or any other call where a channel is specified in the DSC call.

Due to the increasing use of VHF DSC equipment in the non-SOLAS sector, and the advent of VHF DSC Man Overboard devices, there is an increased possibility of ships receiving VHF DSC alerts or announcements which might normally cause a VHF DSC transceiver to switch channels.

However, since 2004, VHF DSC equipment has been built so that automatic channel switching can be disabled to maintain essential communications during critical operations such as ship manoeuvring in Port limits, tug operations, or during critical offshore oil/gas industry operations. This function can be disabled on the transceiver, provided that transceiver is compliant with Recommendation ITU-R M.493-11 (2004) or a more recent version (the current version is M.493-13 (2009)). The DSC equipment should provide visual indication when the automatic switching function is disabled.

Different manufacturers can implement this disabling feature in different ways, and this would normally be explained in the user manual. In some cases, user documentation may not be sufficiently clear on this feature, and advice from the supplier or service agent may need to be sought.

When automatic channel switching is disabled, radios should continue to detect Distress DSC Alerts, but the operator can decide whether to accept the channel request before taking any further action.

If automatic channel switching is disabled during critical operations, the function should be re-enabled once the critical operations are complete. AMSA recommends that this disabling and enabling procedure be included in the ship's bridge procedures.

In all circumstances, users are encouraged to double-check that they are operating on the correct working channel when they are using DSC-capable VHF transceivers capable of automatic channel switching.

Summary

1) Your VHF radio could automatically switch to channel 16 or another channel during critical operations, unless the radio has the disable feature and the disable feature is used. The master, bridge team and pilot should be made aware of this risk.
2) If your VHF radio has the automatic channel switching disable feature, you should disable automatic channel switching during critical operations, and re-enable automatic channel switching after the critical operations are complete.
3) Your bridge procedures should include procedures for enabling and disabling automatic channel switching, and for recording those events in the radio log book.

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