

The ACMA seeks views on the use of VHF radio by recreational boaters

On 22 September 2009, the ACMA released a discussion paper seeking views on possible changes to regulatory arrangements for VHF marine radio used by recreational boat operators.

The purpose of the discussion paper, *VHF Marine Radio Operator Qualification Arrangements—Non-Commercial (Recreational) Vessels*, is to gather comment from users of marine radio in response to concerns in the marine sector about safety and the use of VHF radio by recreational boaters.

VHF marine radio provides a valuable means of keeping in contact with other vessels and coast stations, particularly at times when the weather changes or when help is needed. The number of vessels on Australian waterways is increasing and, with more competitive prices on equipment, so is the proportion of boats and other craft fitted with VHF marine radio.

The review follows concerns expressed to the ACMA by the National Marine Safety Committee (NMSC) and representatives of the maritime community. Many of the concerns focused on perceived declining standards in the use of marine radio and compliance with the requirement to hold an operators' certificate of proficiency.

The discussion paper focuses on the following objectives:

- > Improving the integrity of the radiocommunications spectrum management framework as it applies to the recreational boating community. For example, through effective spectrum planning, licensing and interference management.
- > Examining the needs of the recreational boating community in their use of VHF marine radio, including for safety purposes, and identifying how those needs might best be supported in light of the ACMA's role and responsibilities.

- > Promoting the overall efficiency of the regulatory framework supporting the operation of marine radio by the recreational boating community.

The discussion paper deals with recreational boaters' use of VHF marine radio equipment authorised by the Radiocommunications (Maritime Ship Station 27 MHz and VHF) Class Licence 2001.

Integrity of spectrum management

Managing the regulation of marine radio use is part of the ACMA's broader role in overseeing the regulation, allocation and use of the radiofrequency spectrum. Where appropriate, the ACMA encourages delegated or devolved stakeholder responsibility for certain related functions.

Since 2002, the ACMA has delegated the responsibility of managing the examination and certification scheme for marine radio use to the Australian Maritime College (AMC) under a Deed of Agreement. The expiry of this deed in 2012 provides further impetus for this review.

The discussion paper examines existing regulatory arrangements for recreational marine radio operators. As part of this discussion, the ACMA is interested in views about the mandatory nature of the VHF Certificate of Proficiency in the marine recreational sector.

User needs and safety considerations

A number of issues relating to improving safety outcomes in the sector are canvassed in the paper. The ACMA's involvement in marine safety issues is largely historical and fresh consideration is being given to arrangements in this important area.

In order to respond effectively to the NMSC's concerns, the ACMA is interested in hearing the marine community's views about possible links between a reported decline in the standard of operation on the VHF marine band and the apparent low number of operators holding certificates of proficiency.

Both commonwealth and state/territory agencies have responsibility for certain aspects. These range from the ACMA's responsibility for regulation of the radiofrequency spectrum to the states' and territories' responsibility for vessel licenses which typically deal with carriage of marine radio equipment. A range of ideas on ways to overcome

To help with this review the ACMA has established a VHF Marine Radio Working Party involving key interested bodies like the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, the NMSC, state marine safety organisations, volunteer groups and the Australian Marine Industries Federation. The working party assisted with the development of the discussion paper and will continue to be consulted during the course of the ACMA's review. Further public consultation will be conducted as necessary.

The review follows concerns expressed to the ACMA by the National Marine Safety Committee (NMSC) and representatives of the maritime community.

The ACMA is also seeking comments from recreational users on the necessity of the requirement for marine radio operators in the VHF band to be qualified through a framework governed by the ACMA. The ACMA is keen to better understand the recreational marine community's knowledge of marine radio operator certificates of proficiency and how they may be obtained.

Promotion of overall efficiency

The regulatory framework relating to marine radio is complex and fragmented.

this complexity are discussed and the ACMA is interested in hearing views from interested parties on how to improve overall efficiency.

The paper also discusses possible changes to the existing training and examination scheme for the VHF Certificate of Proficiency. This discussion is directed towards the possible adoption of a more competency-based approach to examinations as well as options for delegating or devolving responsibility for certain related functions.

The closing date for submissions is Friday 18 December 2009. Submissions should be sent by email to mrowp@acma.gov.au.

For more information on this issue and to access a copy of the regulatory framework and the discussion paper, visit the ACMA website at www.acma.gov.au (go to About ACMA: News & media centre > Media releases > ACMA media release 131/2009 – 22 September).

