

U.S. NATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION TASK FORCE GMDSS INFORMATION BULLETIN

TONNAGE INTERPRETATIONS FOR GMDSS APPLICATION

This information bulletin provides a brief discussion of vessel tonnage measurement schemes and the means of determining a vessel's status relative to participation in the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) based on tonnage.

General GMDSS Applicability

U.S. Commercial vessels of 300 gross tons and upward were required to participate in the GMDSS by installing required equipment and carrying certified GMDSS radio operators. GMDSS applies to vessels on international voyages and on domestic voyages offshore but not to vessels on voyages limited to inland waters and the Great Lakes. Small U.S. Passenger vessels operated solely on domestic voyages are not required to participate in the GMDSS but have separate radio requirements under the FCC Rules.

Regulatory vs. Convention Tonnages

Gross tonnage is a parameter reflecting the overall size (e.g. enclosed volume) of a vessel. U.S. statutes provide for vessel measurement under two different systems; the newer, internationally based Convention measurement system or the older, historically based Regulatory measurement system. The Convention measurement system, often referred to as the ITC (International Tonnage Convention) system applies only to vessels that are 79 feet and over in length. The acronym "GT ITC" (or just simply "GT") is sometimes used in reference to gross tonnage assigned under the Convention measurement system. The acronym "GRT" is sometimes used in reference to gross tonnage assigned under the Regulatory measurement system.

Optional Use of Regulatory Tonnage

Under U.S. law, newer vessels and vessels on foreign voyages must be measured under the Convention measurement system. Since gross tonnage under this system often exceeds tonnage measured under the Regulatory system, owners have the option to use Regulatory gross tonnage in determining applicability of domestic laws which were in effect prior to 18 July 1994. GMDSS rules are part of the revised treaty on the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the implementing U.S. statutes for GMDSS fall into this "grandfathered" category. Therefore, Regulatory gross tonnage may be used by the owner of any U.S. flag vessel engaged on a domestic voyage to determine the applicability of GMDSS requirements. For foreign voyages certain categories of older vessels that have not been substantially altered are similarly entitled to use Regulatory gross tonnage to determine the applicability of GMDSS requirements, since the associated tonnage threshold in SOLAS predates the full coming into force of the ITC on July 18, 1982. However, newer vessels (and older vessels that have undergone substantial alterations) must determine GMDSS applicability using Convention gross tonnage while engaged on a foreign voyage. For vessels less than 79 feet in length, regardless of voyage types, Regulatory gross tonnage is used to determine GMDSS applicability.

Determining Tonnage for GMDSS Applicability

With very few exceptions, a vessel subject to GMDSS requirements will have been issued a U.S. Tonnage Certificate. This document shows the tonnage assigned to the vessel and identifies the associated measurement system. In most cases, this tonnage information is also recorded in the Coast Guard's Marine Information for Safety and Law Enforcement System (MISLE) that is accessible from local Coast Guard Marine Inspection offices. The information is also available to the public on the Coast Guard's Port Information exchange System at <http://cgmix.uscg.mil/psix/psix2>. For more detail on determining tonnage applicability, refer to the U.S. Coast Guard Navigation and Vessel Inspection Circular 11-93 (NVIC 11-93)

which is available on the Coast Guard's website www.uscg.mil/hq/cg5/nvic. The NVIC also identifies the specific categories of older vessels engaged on foreign voyages that may use regulatory tonnage in determining GMDSS applicability

For Additional Information

The U.S. tonnage measurement program is administered by the Coast Guard Marine Safety Center's Tonnage Division. Tonnage measurement is performed on behalf of the Coast Guard by authorized measurement organizations. Contact information for the Tonnage Division and authorized measurement organizations can be found on the Coast Guard's Homeport web site by searching on "Tonnage Measurement".

The GMDSS Task Force

This Information Bulletin was approved on 14 October 1997 and updated on 1 October 1998, 16 May 2002, 20 January 2004, and again on 6 January 2007 by the National GMDSS Implementation Task Force, a U.S. Coast Guard sponsored group established to coordinate implementation problems, recommend their resolution, and disseminate GMDSS information. The Task Force is soliciting feedback on problems encountered and invites responses from all concerned. Address responses to Captain Jack Fuechsel, Task Force Executive Director, 1600 North Oak Street #427; Arlington VA 22209; phone 703-527-0484; or email gmdss@comcast.net. See also the GMDSS section of the Coast Guard website at www.navcen.uscg.gov/marcomms (click on GMDSS, then on GMDSS Task Force). Reproduction and wide dissemination of this document is encouraged.

