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 that 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.