



NOAA FISHERIES

National Observer Program

National Observer Program Advisory Team's Safety Advisory Committee

The Safety Advisory Committee advises the National Observer Program Advisory Team on matters of observer safety, health, and welfare. It works to promote a safer and healthier environment for observers to work in and is responsible for developing and recommending the requirements necessary to fulfill NOPAT's national safety standards, including:

- Spearheading and reviewing proposals on observer safety initiatives, along with monitoring and advising on any safety policies and programs that may affect NOAA Fisheries observers.
- Addressing specific safety issues through seminars, workshops, forums, and panel discussions.
- Developing training classes and standards for observer programs' safety trainers.
- Creating and maintaining mechanisms to enforce safety-related policies for observer programs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Observer Know-How: Two-Way Satellite Communication Devices

Safety First for Successful Monitoring

We depend on our observers and at-sea monitors—professionally trained biological technicians who gather crucial information about many U.S. commercial fisheries—to be our eyes and ears on the water. The work of observers is critical to effective fisheries management, and their safety on the job is of utmost importance. Navigating the marine environment can be challenging. Taking care to put safety first at every step ensures those challenges are met with success.

Staying Connected

Two-way communication devices, such as satellite phones or satellite texting devices, may be issued to observers so that they may report issues at sea (such as vessel safety, concerns for the Office of Law Enforcement, problems with harassment, etc.), ask questions about sampling, periodically connect with loved ones, and have two-way communication during a rescue situation, when other communication options are not feasible or available. In some cases, two-way communication devices may be used to assist in emergency situations, but should not be considered primary emergency devices. All observers must carry a Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) as their primary emergency device.

The PLB and two-way communication devices should be kept readily accessible so that you can locate them quickly, even in the dark.

Care and Cleaning of Two-Way Communication Devices

- Reference the manufacturer's guidance for maintaining your device, and before performing any of the steps below.
- The device should be kept in a dry, secure location where it is easily accessible in case of an emergency, such as under rain gear during inclement weather.
- The device should be cleaned regularly using a wet cloth to prevent corrosion and malfunctions. Harsh cleaners or chemicals should be avoided. The following tips can help keep your device in top working condition:
 - Fully charge your device before embarking onto a vessel. Always charge your device when not in use on the vessel.
 - To conserve battery life, turn the communication device off when not in use.
 - Satellite devices need time to triangulate their position. Once the device is turned on, wait a couple of minutes for the device to show that it has acquired a satellite connection before sending a message or referencing the position displayed.
 - Avoid storing the device where prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures can occur, which could cause permanent damage to electronics and batteries.



Top photo: Satellite communicator device.

Bottom photo: An observer examines her satellite communicator device.

Inspection, Testing, and Reporting Issues with Two-Way Communication Devices

A physical inspection and communication test should be performed and logged regularly or per program policy. It is good marine safety practice to visually inspect and test the satellite communication device prior to deployment to ensure that the device has not been damaged or accidentally discharged.

- **Inspection:** Check for cracks or missing screws, which could indicate that the internal workings are compromised. Inspect the gasket surrounding the body to ensure it feels soft and is unbroken. Check the battery expiration date.
- **Testing:** Follow the manufacturer’s recommendations and program guidelines for testing.
- **Reporting Issues:** If the unit fails inspection or testing at any point, contact your employer or observer program staff. For other problems, be sure to record and report any specific issues to your program.



PLB unit.

Routine Communication

Satellite communication devices allow observers to communicate with observer program staff, observer provider personnel, and, in some cases, personal contacts. Some devices may be pre-loaded with observer program staff contact information as well as several “quick” messages that communicate important information with the touch of a button to a set distribution list. Observers may send additional messages to observer program staff and provider contacts. Each program will advise on the type and number of messages allowed. Note that all messages sent and received are visible to observer program staff and there is no expectation of privacy.

Emergency Use

The PLB is the observer’s primary emergency device and should be activated first whenever warranted in an emergency. However, after you have activated your PLB you can also initiate SOS or emergency mode on some satellite devices. If it is safe to do so, maintain two-way communications during an emergency. Consult with your regional program about the specific emergency use capabilities and protocols for your device.