Inside the Nerve Center

A Coast Guard view of non-government-spec emergency beacons.

U.S. Coast Guard SARSAT Liaison Officer Lt. Cmdr. Kathy Niles (pictured above) briefed attendees at a NASA technical work session about concerns over emergency beacons and systems that don't meet government specs or aren't directly linked to Rescue Coordination Centers. For example, when a Spot beacon owner presses the SOS button (911 on older models), Spot signal handlers, not a COSPAS/SARSAT Mission Control Center, handle the initial distress message and relay it. In addition, the Spot doesn't emit a 121.5- or 406-MHz signal, which Coast Guard direction-finding equipment uses for homing. Instead, the Spot GPS alert is based upon a GPS position that is regularly updated via the private-sector satellite system.

Lt. Cmdr. Niles pointed out, by comparison, that the new COSPAS/SARSAT personal locator beacons (PLBs) interface directly with the International Maritime Organization's proven system, are built to tightly controlled specs, and give users a compact distress beacon that affords both GPS position finding and direction-finding capability on 121.5 and 406 MHz. However, these units do not function as tracking devices and are not meant to notify those ashore of the whereabouts of their friends at sea.