

Long-awaited news: FCC OKs AIS-B in U.S.

As *PS* was wrapping up testing of the Raymarine AIS250, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced its full approval of the use of Automatic Information Systems (AIS) Class B transponders in U.S. waters. The ruling, long-awaited by AIS proponents and product makers, means the devices can be sold and used in the U.S.

The FCC adopted international regulations (IEC 62287-1) set in 2002 regarding the certification, testing, and usage of Class B transponders, but added a few requirements. It ordered that static data, including a ship's Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI) number, be input by those who sell and install the devices. Labels on the devices warning against entering incorrect data also are required. These steps, the FCC said, are meant to ensure the system works as intended to increase maritime safety and the U.S. Coast Guard's ability to use AIS for homeland security. The order is set to take effect 30 days after it's published in the Federal Register; no date has been set for that.

The FCC action has opened the floodgates for new products (and those already sold internationally) to hit the U.S. market. The commission granted some makers (ACR Electronics, Navico, Seven-Star Electronics, and Software Radio Technology) waivers to sell their products stateside prior to the official start date. And others, like Raymarine, already have the wheels in motion to release new AIS-B transponders in 2009. As this issue goes to press, a batch of products is going through the FCC certification process.

The ACR Nauticast AIS-B is among the Class B transponders the FCC recently certified.

.....

As with any product in a competitive market, we expect to see AIS receiver and transponder prices drop as new units hit the shelves. Boaters can also look forward to having more options as far as features and display compatibility go. We recommend giving the market a little more time to flux before rushing out to buy an AIS receiver or Class B transponder.

While AIS technology does not relieve us of our duty to practice good seamanship—i.e. proper watchkeeping and collision-avoidance techniques—it does provide an extra “eye in the sky.” It's not without its drawbacks though. With AIS-B, there is no guarantee ships can see you due to its weaker transmission signal and the fact that most ships will set their display to “hide” Class B broadcasts in an effort to declutter their screen. Operating under the assumption that other boats know you're there just because you're broadcasting AIS-B signals would be a dangerous and potentially costly mistake.

In the end, it's *Practical Sailor's* view that anything that promotes safe passagemaking is a worthwhile tool. We plan to test AIS-B transponders in the near future, so stay tuned.

