NOAA FISHERIES

National Observer Program

**National Observer Program Advisory Team's Safety Advisory Committee**

The Safety Advisory Committee (SAC) advises the National Observer Program Advisory Team (NOPAT) 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 which 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: Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons and Personal Locator Beacons

## Safety First for Successful Monitoring

We depend on our observers and at-sea monitors—professionally trained biological technicians who gather crucial information about what species are caught and discarded by U.S. commercial fishing vessels—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.

## Survival at Sea: Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon

While most observers and commercial fishing workers will go their entire careers without experiencing a catastrophic incident at sea, the fact remains that accidents happen. One key piece of equipment in the event of a serious accident is the personal **E**mergency **P**osition-**I**ndicating **R**adio **B**eacon, or **EPIRB**. EPIRBs and **P**ersonal **L**ocator **B**eacons (**PLB**s) are signaling devices that transmit distress signals to rescuers via a satellite system. EPIRBs, which are typically registered to a vessel, are activated either automatically (CAT I) or manually (CAT II). PLBs are registered to individuals and, as a norm, they **MUST** be activated **manually**.

### What observers should know about EPIRBs

As part of the pre-trip safety check, observers should ensure they locate and review the EPIRB. Observers should also be familiar with national and regional policy on removing EPIRBs from their housing. In most cases, a vessel representative must remove the EPIRB for inspection and testing.

- **Know where the EPIRB is mounted.** EPIRBs are required to be mounted in a location where they can float free of the vessel in case of a sinking.
- **Make sure the EPIRB is registered.** Any EPIRB on a vessel MUST be registered with NOAA; a dated registration sticker with a matching Unique Identification Number with the device should be present on the device. (Learn more and register here: https://www.sarsat.noaa.gov/beacon.html).
- **Check the battery expiration as noted on the unit.**
- **Know how to activate**. EPIRBs can be manually activated by removing the manual bracket and placing in water or simply by pressing the power button.
- **Understand how to test.** There is also a test position on the activation switch that allows the entire unit to be tested without generating a false alarm.
- **Once activated, leave the EPIRB on,** until you are rescued or receive specific instruction from the rescuing agency to turn it off.


*Top: EPIRB in hydrostatic housing.*
*Bottom: EPIRB in a mounting bracket.*

### What observers should know about PLBs

- Attach to PFD or person. PLBs should be attached to personal flotation devices at all times.
- Know how to manually activate in the event of an emergency. As a norm, PLBs **MUST** be activated **manually**.
- Make sure registration is current. Like EPIRBs, PLBs must also be registered with NOAA and carry a dated registration sticker.
- Check the battery expiration as noted on the unit.
- Once activated, leave the PLB on, until you are rescued or receive specific instruction from the rescuing agency to turn it off.


*PLB unit.*

### What observers should do in the event of an accidental activation of an EPIRB or PLB

Contact the Coast Guard at 1-855-406-USCG (8724), and reach out to your observer program to alert them to a possible false alarm as soon as you are aware of the false activation.

### EPIRBs and PLBs work within the NOAA-operated Search And Rescue Satellite Aided Tracking (SARSAT) System