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PLB vs. EPIRB - which is right for you?

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Several years ago I interviewed an angler who had fallen overboard on a nighttime run offshore and whose friends didn't notice he was missing for more than an hour. The unlucky boater struggled to stay afloat and alive for more than 12 hours until he was finally spotted the next morning by a couple who just happened to be cruising past. He wasn't wearing a life jacket, and he had no way of signaling for help.

By the time he was found, the 34-year-old fisherman told me he had "said his goodbyes" and figured he could only hold out, at best, for another hour. He spent five days in a hospital recovering from the ordeal. When he got out, the first thing he did was buy an offshore flotation jacket, a strobe and an EPIRB.

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Smart. Those kinds of brushes with eternity have a way of changing your perspective on safety and survival.

If you find yourself in harm's way - especially if you're offshore and out of VHF range or in the water or aboard a sinking boat - activating an EPIRB or a personal locator beacon is one of the surest ways there is of summoning help.

There are differences between the two types of 406 MHz beacons that are worth noting if you're trying to figure out which is best for the kind of boating you do. The differences include:

- A personal locator beacon is smaller, designed to be worn or carried, and costs less than an EPIRB. Prices for a **PLB** range from \$300 to \$600 vs. \$700 to \$1,200 for an **EPIRB**.
- **EPIRBs**, by definition, must float upright in a transmitting position. They activate when out of their brackets and wet. They will transmit for a minimum of 48 hours at temperatures down to minus 4 F. They're waterproof to 10 meters for up to 10 minutes, and they're equipped with a strobe. **PLBs** don't have to float at all, although some are inherently buoyant and others float with the aid of a flotation pouch. None - and this is important - float upright in a transmitting position. Their battery life is half that of an EPIRB; they must transmit for a minimum of 24 hours at temperatures down to minus 4 F. PLBs can only be activated manually, and they're waterproof as a minimum to 10 centimeters for 12 hours or 10 meters for 5 minutes. (ACR manufactures a model that's waterproof to 5 meters for 1 hour or 10 meters for 10 minutes.) PLBs don't have to have a strobe, although some are equipped with a flashing LED for visual detection.
- **EPIRBs** are designed to be mounted in a bracket or carried in a ditch bag, and they're registered to the vessel. A **PLB** is carried by an individual and registered to a person rather than a boat.

Other points worth considering:



Nobody ever plans to abandon ship, so keep your PLB on you.

- Neither an EPIRB nor a PLB will transmit its emergency signal to a satellite if the antenna is submerged. "**The antennas have to be clear of the water**," says Chris Wahler, marketing manager for beacon manufacturer ACR Electronics.
- Because PLBs don't float upright in a transmitting position - remember, some don't float at all - smart users will devise a way to **attach the device to their life jackets** before trouble strikes. Wahler says an effective method is fastening the beacon with a strap or Velcro patch located up in the collarbone region of the life jacket, so the antenna is out of the water and you have both hands free. "You're going

to be busy doing other things," he says. "Hanging on to a piece of wreckage ... having two hands free to cope with that is pretty important."

- Once you turn on either your EPIRB or PLB, **leave it on until you're rescued**. Wahler says it's not a good idea to turn a beacon off to try and conserve battery life. To the Coast Guard, activating and then deactivating one looks more like a possible hoax than someone in distress, Wahler says. "There's plenty of battery power," he says.
- A PLB is a good option if you boat alone or shorthanded. But remember, to be effective **a PLB has to be worn or carried by the boater**. "A PLB doesn't do you any good if it's not on you when you go overboard," Wahler says. "And no one plans on going overboard or having a boat sink underneath them."
- Whether you decide on an EPIRB or a PLB, it is imperative that you **register** your beacon (see **Properly register your EPIRB**). "Without that, you're delaying your own rescue," Wahler says.
- **Read the product support manual** carefully. The Coast Guard maintains that you're twice as likely to survive if you know the proper way to use your equipment. (Read **EPIRB basics, a primer**.)
- When an EPIRB or PLB is first activated, it takes **100 seconds** before the first data burst leaves the beacon. After that, the device transmits every 50 seconds, plus or minus two seconds. And with that, the cavalry should be coming over the horizon before too long.

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