

Juneau tracking program adds layer of safety to vessels

by Ted Land
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JUNEAU, Alaska -- One of the world's most advanced marine tracking systems continues to grow in Alaska.

The Juneau-based Marine Exchange is a non-profit group devoted to safety at sea.

Boat owners will mount a satellite transponder on their vessel and almost immediately they become a part of one of the most sophisticated marine tracking systems in the world.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game research vessel, the Medeia, spends about 125 days a year at sea.



Boats can buy the satellite transponders, which will give their location to the Marine Exchange in case of emergency. (Daniel Hernandez/KTUU-DT)

"We go out and do surveys for king crab and herring and whatnot," said Capt. Russel Sandstrom.

Sandstrom has been working onboard for the past 15 years, and even with his experience, it's nice to have a little help.

"It adds a real safety margin there as far as them knowing where we're at at any moment," he said.

AIS, or Automatic Identification Systems, are installed on many boats, and Ed Page's group, the Marine Exchange of Alaska, keeps track of them.

"Many of my staff are prior Coast Guard people. We have over 100 years of Coast Guard experience. I, myself, have 30 years; retired captain Chief of Marine Safety for Alaska," Page said.



Ed Page, who runs the Alaska Marine Exchange, says there are more than 100 years of Coast Guard experience on his staff. (Daniel Hernandez/KTUU-DT)

Last month the Coast Guard honored the Marine Exchange with one of its highest civilian awards: The Meritorious Public Service Award.

"Most of the people here really believe that the true benefit of this and our No. 1 goal is to save lives and if you can save a life that's probably the most rewarding thing that you can do," Page said.

They can help coordinate vessel traffic during disasters, like after the recent earthquake in Chile.

"For instance, a tsunami, if we really believed there was going to be a large tsunami we could locate vessels with the system and the Coast Guard could alert them of the tsunami in case they hadn't gotten the information," Page said.

For captains like Sandstrom, it's just one more layer of safety.

"Most recreational boats and most commercial fishing boats don't have this equipment, but certainly all the cruise ships and the tugs, more and more of them are getting it now just because it's a pretty handy thing to have," he said.

Boat owners must buy the equipment and pay a small fee each time they use it, but most of the funding for the Marine Exchange comes from the state, grants and private donations.



While there is a small fee each time the transponder is used, most of the Marine Exchange's funding comes from the state, grants and private donations. (Daniel Hernandez/KTUU-DT)

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