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Coast Guard software glitch leaves Arctic mariners in the cold

Software problems means rescue calls to Iqaluit may or may not be heard

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The Canadian Coast Guard ship Des Groseilliers, seen here in the Bay of Strathcona off the coast of Baffin Island in Nunavut, helped to rescue a person who was on a resupply ship who needed medical help. Arctic mariners are now being warned their calls to the Coast Guard station in Iqaluit may or may not be heard. Fisheries and Oceans Canada

If you're a mariner heading out on Arctic waters, don't rely on the Canadian Coast Guard for help in an emergency. Technical glitches in a new communications system means your call may or may not be received.

"Somebody could be in trouble and saying the magic words 'Mayday, Mayday' and our operators may not be able to pick that up," says Chad Stroud, president of the union that represents Coast Guard communications officers.

In summertime, the northern Coast Guard is often called on to rescue boaters or sailboats venturing into the Northwest Passage or High Arctic.

This year, a problem with new software is causing delays in transmission. By the time the message arrives in Iqaluit — the only manned Coast Guard station in the Arctic — the words sound garbled and may not be understood.

The problems follow a 2011 decision to move staff from the Coast Guard station in Inuvik, N.W.T. to Iqaluit — part of a cost-saving measure to bring the number of Coast Guard stations across the country from 22 to 11.

Stroud says his members were informed that the equipment had been tested and was fine before the 2014 shipping season began. Now there are problems.

"We have grave concerns about this equipment," he says.

The Coast Guard issued a Notice to Shipping July 6 informing mariners that "services provided from the remote controlled transmit and receive facilities located at Inuvik may be subject to

intermittent operations.”

The notice says testing to resolve the situation is ongoing.

Stroud says the “consolidation and modernization” of the Coast Guard across Canada was supposed to be done by spring 2015.

“But because of these problems, the department deemed they actually did have a problem that could definitely put the safety of the mariner and the general public at risk. So they stopped it.”

Stroud says he has been informed the problem should be fixed within the next week or so, but further details have not been forthcoming.

“It seems like the Harper government issued a gag order on the Department of Fisheries and Oceans itself,” he says. “Before they started having these problems, the department was very good at issuing communications to our union and the members. Now it’s just been a standstill. We’re not getting any information.”

Stroud says all mariners should take pains to let family know when and where they are travelling on the water and what time they expect to arrive, and family should be prepared to call the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre with those details if something goes wrong.

So far, he says he’s not aware of any incidents that have been affected by the problem.



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