# HOUSE BILL REPORT
# HJM 4012

**As Reported By House Committee On:**
Energy & Utilities

**Brief Description:** Requesting permission to use personal locator beacons.

**Sponsors:** Representatives Stevens, Cairnes, Elliot, Thompson, Koster, Sheahan, D. Schmidt, Delvin, McMorris, Robertson and Mielke.

**Brief History:**
**Committee Activity:**
Energy & Utilities: 2/8/95, 2/28/95 [DPS].

## HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY & UTILITIES

**Majority Report:** The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 11 members: Representatives Casada, Chairman; Crouse, Vice Chairman; Hankins, Vice Chairman; Kessler, Ranking Minority Member; Kremen, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Chandler; Huff; Mastin; Mielke; Mitchell and Patterson.

**Staff:** Margaret Allen (786-7110).

**Background:** COSPAS and SARSAT are satellite systems that work as one. SARSAT, operated by the United States, Canada, and France, is the acronym for "Search And Rescue Satellite-Aided Tracking." COSPAS, operated by the former Soviet Union, performs an equivalent function. The first satellites for COSPAS and SARSAT were launched in 1982 and 1983, respectively.

Four COSPAS-SARSAT satellites orbit the earth. They receive signals from emergency radio beacons and relay them to ground stations, which process the signals to determine where the beacon is located. The ground stations then relay this information to search-and-rescue authorities.

The SARSAT program is managed in the United States by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, but radio spectrum is regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

There are three kinds of radio beacons: Emergency Locator Transmitters (ELTs), carried by aircraft, Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRBs), carried

by marine vessels, and smaller beacons called Personal Locator Beacons (PLBs), for use in land activities such as hiking or camping.

In the United States, federal regulations limit use of radio beacons to ELTs and EPIRBs. However, in 1992 and 1993, PLB programs were authorized in Alaska and also for various military locations and activities.

In Canada, PLBs are available without restriction to Canadians and visitors travelling in Canada.

The newest, most sophisticated generation of beacons transmit on 406 MHz. Codes transmitted by these beacons can include identification of the beacon, as well as of the vehicle and its country of registration and registered owner. The origin of the signal can be located within a radius of two kilometers worldwide. A satellite will store signals transmitted on 406 MHz until the satellite is within range of a ground station.

**Summary of Substitute Bill:** The memorial petitions the President and Congress: (1) To permit PLBs to be used in Washington and the rest of the United States; (2) That the FCC process rules regarding the use of 406 MHz PLBs to include measures to mitigate operational and fiscal impacts on search and rescue organizations; (3) That FCC approval of PLBs include technical standards similar to those for aircraft and vessels; (4) That a PLB approval agency be named; (5) That a process for registering PLBs be formalized; and (6) That necessary search-and-rescue points of contact be established within each state.

**Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:** The substitute bill includes language requesting: (1) That FCC rules regarding the use of PLBs include "measures to mitigate operational and fiscal impacts on search and rescue operations;" and (2) that FCC standards for approval of PLBs include technical standards similar to those for aircraft and vessels. Also, the substitute bill omits language: (1) Suggesting the value of PLBs can be "clearly demonstrated" and the experimental PLB program in Alaska has been an "unqualified success;" and (2) stating U.S. citizens have been required to obtain PLBs from Canada due to the lack of availability of the devices in the U.S.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Not Requested.

**Effective Date of Substitute Bill:** Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

**Testimony For:** It’s just a matter of time before PLBs are approved. There are always some concerns regarding misuse, malfunctions and other false alarms. This

new language will help states control how a PLB program will be implemented. There will always be false alarms but what price tag do you put on saving a life?

**Testimony Against:** In 1994, the false alarm rate for emergency locator beacons was 97.3 percent. If Congress approves the use of PLBs and there is even a 20 percent to 30 percent false alarm rate, it could bankrupt search-and-rescue programs.

**Testified:** [Testified on Original Bill] Representative Val Stevens, prime sponsor; Major General Greg Barlow, Washington National Guard (pro). [Testified on Substitute Bill] Christopher Long, Washington State Emergency Management, Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development; and Larry Erickson, Washington Sheriff and Police Chiefs Association (pro). Brian Holmes, Washington Department of Transportation (con).