SENATE BILL REPORT

SHJM 4012

As Reported By Senate Committee On:
Energy, Telecommunications & Utilities, February 15, 1996

Brief Description: Requesting permission to use personal locator beacons.

Sponsors: House Committee on Energy & Utilities (originally sponsored by Representatives Stevens, Cairnes, Elliot, Thompson, Koster, Sheahan, D. Schmidt, Delvin, McMorris, Robertson and Mielke).

Brief History:
Committee Activity: Energy, Telecommunications & Utilities: 3/21/95, 3/23/95 [DP]; 2/15/96 [DP].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY, TELECOMMUNICATIONS & UTILITIES

Majority Report: Do pass.
Signed by Senators Sutherland, Chair; Loveland, Vice Chair; Finkbeiner, Hochstatter and Owen.

Staff: Susan Ridgley (786-7444)

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 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.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Testimony For: PLBs are useful and could save lives. It doesn't make sense that people can use them in Alaska and Canada but not here. Registering PLBs will help enormously in preventing false alarm searches. The FCC made a bad decision when they denied licensing.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: Representative Stevens, prime sponsor; Tim Schellberg, Police; Chris Long, WA State Emergency Management.