

Sir, Can I Use My ECDIS Now?

July 2002 signalled a significant milestone in the long, tortuous life of ECDIS. It was the month that ECDIS was formally recognised (and specifically mentioned) in SOLAS Chapter V. It should have been the month that mariners could set sail using ECDIS, confident in the knowledge that the regulations were in place, the equipment recognised and the chart data plentiful, an updating service in place. Sadly, this was not to be.

In reality, if a ship's captain leaves the paper charts ashore and sets sail with an "ECDIS" on the bridge, is he complying with SOLAS Chapter V? Well, maybe. It all depends on what the relevant Flag and Port State control authorities require. What training standards do they demand? Which ECDIS testing authorities do they recognise? What do they require in the form of back-up arrangements? Do they require paper charts to be carried? If so, which ones?

The world's national maritime administrations have been slow to provide guidance to mariners on how ECDIS will be used to meet the chart navigation requirements of SOLAS V. Whilst unfortunate, this is not surprising. It appears that the IMO and its member Maritime Administrations have lost much of their initial enthusiasm and interest for ECDIS because of its painfully slow introduction, beset by complex standards, poor official chart coverage and a level of unhelpful propaganda and argument from various quarters. Some ECDIS manufacturers seem to be turning their attention increasingly towards the military rather than the commercial market. We also have some high-end (and much cheaper) ECSs that are becoming potent competitors of ECDIS. Another factor is that the IMO has invited the IEC to develop over the next year or so a new performance standard for the display of all navigational information, including what is on the chart. This is being carried out by Working Group 13 of IEC Technical Committee 80. Will this new Performance Standard overtake ECDIS? Quite possibly.

For now, the mariner continues blithely to use unofficial electronic charts. One reason is because most mariners don't know the difference between an "official" and an "unofficial" electronic chart - even though this is now defined in SOLAS V. Another reason is that even though official raster charts are allowed under SOLAS V and provide almost global coverage for ECDIS, not all ECDIS are capable of using this type of data.

Those maritime Administrations that have issued guidance on how they will recognise ECDIS under SOLAS V have provided a variable range of interpretations. Some require a full outfit of paper charts to be carried regardless of ECDIS, while others are prepared to allow the use of ECDIS without paper charts at all - even for the RCDS (raster chart) mode of operation. At least one administration is allowing ECS rather than ECDIS to be used in certain of its government vessels. Some Administrations require a second ECDIS as a back-up, while others are prepared to accept various combinations of ECS equipment loaded with ECDIS software and official digital chart data. No wonder mariners are confused.

The widespread use of ECDIS "and all it promises" - is still years away. Perhaps it is time to launch an active education campaign to clarify the requirements and get on with providing the necessary data and services.