



VHF AND ATIS (Automatic Transmitter Identification System)

By Mike Leach (March 2013)

Please send any updates or corrections to eiws-editor@theca.org.uk.

The development of **ATIS** (NB: not to be confused with AIS "Automatic Identification System"), was intended to identify vessels travelling on the inland waterways of several European countries. These countries together form the **Regional Arrangement Concerning the Radiotelephone Service on Inland Waterways** (RAINWAT). All vessels now entering these waterways have to be fitted with a radio that can identify itself, by a 10-digit ATIS identification number, every time the "Transmit" switch is used. Since 2009 this requirement for ATIS-enabled radios applies to all vessels **including visiting pleasure craft**. Certain functions must not be used in ATIS Mode, including:

- DSC (Digital Selective Calling)
- High Power (25 watts) transmission; Low Power (1W) must be used
- Dual Watch and Scanning

The rules on ATIS are governed by the RAINWAT Agreement signed by Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Moldova, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Serbia, the Slovak Republic, Switzerland. The original "Basel" agreement was superseded by the April 2012 "Bucharest" agreement.

How does ATIS work?

In normal circumstances, a vessel is identified by its call sign or MMSI. However, to use ATIS, a vessel must also have an ATIS number. At the end of every transmission (every time you release the PTT button), the radio sends out an audible signal, which contains the ship's ATIS number, identifying the vessel to marine coast stations and inland stations.

Although the UK is not a signatory to the agreement implementing these rules, OFCOM have agreed with the RAINWAT countries that, for UK vessels, the ATIS number will be formed by taking the vessels MMSI and adding the digit 9 as a prefix, making a ten-digit number. ATIS **must** be disabled in UK waters as its use is banned here.

How can I tell if my radio supports ATIS?

Manufacturers that produce VHF radios for the European market now make sets that allow the user to switch between DSC and ATIS. You should consult your instruction manual or ask your dealer to see how your set can be switched to ATIS working for the European inland waterways. Manufacturers can also enable ATIS on some older models for a fee (e.g. approx £45 incl VAT plus return carriage, in the case of ICOM and Standard Horizon); the radio has to be returned to them for this to be done, after first obtaining (from OFCOM in the case of UK-licensed radios) the ATIS Code. Some older models of radio cannot be made ATIS-capable.



Ofcom has provided a comprehensive explanation of ATIS and RAINWAT on their website, which explains what ATIS is, how it works and the action you need to take prior to venturing onto the inland waterways of the signatory countries including how to request the Notice of Variation to your Ship Radio Licence and thereby the ATIS number for your vessel.

A copy of the Regional Arrangement should be carried on board; it can be downloaded from the RAINWAT website <http://www.rainwat.bipt.be/arrangement>.

It is understood that the revised Agreement of 2012 permits the use by Small Craft (less than 20m LOA) of ATIS-equipped handheld VHF, but only on a country-by-country basis subject to permission from the country in question. We do not have unambiguous confirmation that any country permits hand-held use, but understand that Netherlands and Belgium do and that Germany does not.

Similarly, we are not sure whether a non-compliant fixed VHF is allowed to remain in place if not in use, or must be removed (perhaps, if a non-compliant set is not used to transmit, a “listen-only” watch may not be in breach of the Rules?).

In summary

- It seems best to have an ATIS-enabled Fixed VHF, on which ATIS can be easily switched on and off.
- Some, but not all, older DSC VHF sets can be modified to incorporate ATIS, at reasonable cost
- Netherlands and Belgium allow use of hand-held ATIS-enabled VHF; Germany does not
- Unclear whether it's permissible to leave a non-compliant fixed VHF in situ

It seems that the Dutch, Belgians and Germans are unlikely to take active exception to non-compliant VHF sets being left in place provided that they do not transmit. However, it's worth pointing out that DSC/ATIS switchable VHF radios are getting quite cheap nowadays.

IMPORTANT NOTE: in early 2023 a number of VHF channels for bridges and locks in inland Europe changed due to the introduction of digital ship information channels. In particular, channels 24, 25, 26, 84, 85 and 86 **must not be used** for voice communication. If you have older charts, they may still show the wrong channel. The new rules mean that most older VHF radios may need to be reprogrammed in order to use them legally in Europe (although this may be unevenly enforced at first). Currently, however, it is illegal to use a VHF radio that has not been reprogrammed in Belgium. See <https://www.bipt.be/operators/publication/introduction-of-the-marine-radiotelephone-vdes-channel-plan> for details.

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