

Electronic Flares  
John Collins USCGAux SBOS ADSO-PE

Code of Federal Regulations, [33 CFR 175.110](#), specifies that boats 16 feet in length and longer must have certain visual, handheld distress signaling devices between sunset and sunrise. For the past few years, the only things that could meet the requirements were hand held flares.

Handheld flares are expensive, have a limited shelf life and can cause safety issues for boat and crew. Since they are pyrotechnics they must be carefully handled.

[33 CFR 175.130\(1\)](#) says that the night part of the requirement can be met by a handheld electric distress light that meets the requirements of [46 CFR 161.013](#). The day part can be met by an orange flag with a black square in it.

[46 CFR 161.013](#) specifies that it must flash International Morse Code S-O-S with a white light with specified duration characteristics and intensity. It must float in fresh water and have an independent power source.

There are now several electronic flares that meet these requirements. The paperwork with them will say the following: "Night Visual Distress Signal for Boats Complies with U.S. Coast Guard Requirements in 46 CFR 161.013. For Emergency Use Only."

When you see something advertised as "Coast Guard Approved", it means that the manufacturer has certified that it meets certain requirements. The Coast Guard actually does not physically approve anything.