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Agenda Item 4: Asia/Pacific and Inter-regional SAR planning, Coordination and Cooperation

RECIPROCAL SAR SERVICES BENCHMARKING ARRANGEMENT BETWEEN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

(Presented by New Zealand and Australia)

SUMMARY

This paper presents information regarding a new reciprocal search and rescue (SAR) services benchmarking program between Australia and New Zealand.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In 2023 Maritime New Zealand (Maritime NZ) and the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) agreed to implement a new reciprocal SAR services benchmarking program. The first activity under this new program was held in August 2023 with Maritime NZ benchmarking AMSA. The second and reciprocal activity was held in November 2024.

1.2 This new arrangement has been implemented to fulfil four objectives:

- a) Provide a formal mechanism for both organisations to benchmark their SAR services and drive continuous improvement actions;
- b) Grow and enhance the close operational connection between the two SAR organisations, noting that Australia and New Zealand have neighboring SAR Regions;
- c) Implement an on-going independent review process for the SAR services of both agencies to support meeting the requirements of the ICAO Universal Safety Oversight Audit Program Continuous Monitoring Approach (USOAP CMA); and
- d) Assess alignment with the ICAO and IMO goal for global SAR services to harmonize their aeronautical and maritime SAR services and, as far as practicable, conformity with the ICAO/IMO International Aeronautical and Maritime SAR (IAMSAR) Manual.

2. DISCUSSION

SAR Benchmarking Program Summary

2.1 AMSA and Maritime NZ agreed to implement a reciprocal benchmarking program for both SAR organisations to supplement other related oversight arrangements already in place within both agencies. The program provides for an independent assessment of each other's joint aeronautical and maritime SAR services and provides additional benefits including opportunities for closer collaboration, cooperation, learning and SAR service improvements.

2.2 Benchmarking activities will rotate between both agencies, nominally on an annual basis, with one agency visiting the other to conduct the assessment.

2.3 The program involves the option of conducting a SAR exercise (SAREX) to coincide with the benchmarking activity to assist with each independent assessment by demonstrating procedures and practices in action, including debriefing and lessons learnt processes. This has the added benefit to both agencies of meeting the ICAO and IMO requirement for regular SAREXs.

2.4 Ideally, the agency conducting the benchmarking assessment should provide a minimum team of two staff to conduct the assessment, preferably one aeronautical and one maritime SAR subject matter expert, as well as a trained auditor to provide guidance on conduct of the assessment process as appropriate.

2.5 The benchmarking tool used for each assessment is based on the *National self-assessment on search and rescue system* questionnaire from the IAMSAR Manual, Volume I, Appendix H.

2.6 The agency conducting the benchmarking assessment provides a report of observations and any identified opportunities for improvement to the other agency.

Benchmarking Activity

2.7 The independent assessments conducted by AMSA and Maritime NZ's were benchmarked against the international SAR obligations of the Convention of International Civil Aviation, the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, and the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS).

2.8 The Framework for this activity was provided by the National self-assessment on search and rescue system questionnaire, IAMSAR Manual Volume I, Appendix H (2022 Edition). Each agency identified key questions within the questionnaire as a primary focus for its assessment, however the actual assessments extended to seeking additional information from staff during the activity.

2.9 The inaugural benchmarking activity was successfully conducted over three days from 22 to 24 August 2023 when Maritime NZ carried out an assessment of AMSA's Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) in Canberra, Australia.

2.10 The second reciprocal benchmarking activity was successfully conducted over three days from 12 to 14 November 2024 when a team from AMSA carried out an assessment of Maritime NZ's Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCCNZ) in Wellington, New Zealand. The AMSA team consisted of:

- a) an AMSA Response Centre Manager;
- b) a Senior Search and Rescue Officer – Aviation;
- c) a Senior Search and Rescue Officer – Maritime; and
- d) a Search and Rescue Officer – Maritime.

2.11 The activity involved a series of interviews, practical activities including a half-day SAREX involving multiple SAR challenges and desktop assessments of JRCCNZ systems, tools and procedures.

2.12 The benchmarking activity included the following to assist the assessment:

- a) **Discussion-based Questioning and Evidence Provision** – largely a desktop type activity, Maritime NZ representatives provided verbal responses to questions asked by AMSA assessors, and provided evidence which included the viewing of electronic and paper-based documents, procedures, records, systems, etc. and system demonstrations where practicable.
- b) **SAREX** – to demonstrate JRCCNZ SAR response, procedures and practices, a SAREX scenario and type was agreed between both agencies in a format that was achievable using the available staffing without impacting on normal operational delivery of JRCCNZ's SAR Service.
 - The SAREX was conducted internally to JRCCNZ as a SAR communications and coordination demonstration.
 - SAREX telephone calls and written communications were limited to within Maritime NZ. Some limited external communications were also conducted with pre-briefed stakeholders.
 - An internal Maritime NZ Exercise Control Centre simulated communications by other external agencies including Air Traffic Services, Police, other SAR units, other government agencies and contacts to and from JRCCNZ.
- c) **Quick Decision Exercises (QDEs)** – were utilised to demonstrate SAR response, or parts of a SAR response, with a focus on specific JRCCNZ procedures and processes. This enabled the AMSA assessors to raise specific new scenarios on an ad hoc basis and to further explore actions taken during the SAREX.
- d) **Hot Wash/Debrief** – at the completion of the JRCCNZ assessment the AMSA team provided observations from the SAREX along with initial observations from the Discussion-based questioning and the Quick Decision Exercises.
- e) In addition, over the course of the benchmarking visit the AMSA team were able to observe JRCCNZ coordinate a number of live Search and Rescue Operations (SAROPs) which helped AMSA build on the SAREX observations.

2.13 The AMSA team, in line with the shared vision of using this activity to drive each agency to improve, identified areas of strength and opportunities for improvement for Maritime NZ to consider. Through its participation in this activity, the AMSA team also identified learnings and insights to take back to Australia.

2.14 Overall, the activity achieved its objectives and strengthened the bilateral SAR relationship, cooperation, and personal contacts between both agencies.

Improving the Process and Next Steps

2.15 As this is a new initiative and both agencies have conducted a review of the other, AMSA and Maritime NZ are now reviewing the conduct of the first round of activities in order to determine any improvements to the process. This includes whether the IAMSAR Manual National self-assessment on search and rescue system questions could be better targeted, whether the activity would more accurately be described as a Peer Review, and what future scheduling interval is considered necessary.

2.16 Maritime NZ will report back to AMSA at the next scheduled benchmarking activity in quarter three of the current calendar year, on actions it has taken as a result of the AMSA report.

3. ACTION BY THE MEETING

- 3.1 The meeting is invited to note the information contained in this paper.
