

Soundings

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Gear Test: Boatsense monitor system

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Whenever I leave my boat for the day or even for a few hours, I glance at it and hope everything will be in the same shape when I return. I worry about such issues as my vintage Boston Whaler's battery running down during a storm while the bilge pump attempts to keep up with the rain, or

— less critical but still frustrating — losing AC power aboard my trawler and having a week's worth of fresh food in the refrigerator spoil. I wanted a way to keep a careful eye on the boats when I'm not around.



Boatsense Solutions of Edgecomb, Maine, has designed and manufactured a remote vessel-monitoring system that is both practical and cost-effective, and should prove to be a valuable asset for boat owners. The Boatsense vessel monitoring system uses your existing cell phone to provide text messages regarding the status of whatever is being monitored. Although there is a \$180 annual subscription fee for the service, that breaks down to \$15 a month, quite reasonable for the peace of mind the system affords.

Boatsense is relatively simple to install, requiring no extensive wiring or intrusive keypads. In fact, it's easy to forget that it's operating until you're notified of an abnormal condition. Whether your boat is on a mooring, in a slip or at anchor, Boatsense can alert you to numerous issues on board, including high bilge water, when the level returns to normal, and low battery voltage. It also provides three auxiliary inputs that can be used to monitor almost any other system on board. With the addition of various sensors, switches or contacts, you can customize the system to suit your needs.

My marina requires that a set of keys be left in the office for all boats at the docks. With the Boatsense system it is easy to monitor if someone enters the cabin or even just boards the boat. I trust the marina staff, but it is reassuring to know that if they feel the need to go aboard, I will know as soon as they open the door. You could also monitor fire alarms, your shore power connection, engine status, and whether your programmed air conditioning is running.

Boatsense uses cellular technology to transmit a specified alarm condition to up to three different cellular phone numbers that you are able to program by text messaging, and can change at any time. Boatsense is delivered ready to monitor bilge water level and battery condition, while the three additional inputs can be programmed as you desire. The Boatsense unit (radio) measures approximately 5-by-3-by-1-1/4 inches, including the integral mounting flange, and six 18-inch, 18-gauge wire pigtails extend from one side of the case. As a good indication of the overall product quality and marinated design, the pigtails are stranded and tinned Ancor marine-grade wire, while the internal electronic components are potted for protection against the marine environment. The wire pigtails provide connections for battery ground, battery positive (requires a 4-amp inline fuse), bilge pump float or sensor switch, two that offer normally open

circuits, and one that provides a normally closed circuit.

The unit requires no external antenna, so it can be mounted inconspicuously. And it is waterproof, so it can be mounted inside or outside the boat. However, Boatsense Solutions recommends that it be mounted as high on the vessel as possible for better cellular signal reception. Wiring is straightforward using the color-coded wires and clear diagram provided. I wired the Boatsense through a terminal block for testing purposes, enabling me to experiment with different sensors and input devices. The unit is now installed inside my Whaler's center console using proper, heat-sealed butt connectors.

Boatsense must be activated before installation. The procedure is straightforward, so long as you read and follow the instructions carefully — and can text-message with your cell phone. I'll admit to requiring a bit of technical assistance with that part, but I contacted Boatsense Solutions through its tech support e-mail and received prompt and courteous guidance from one of the product creators, David Jacques, who had me up and running quickly. The response time for reporting programmed fault conditions by text message was less than a minute. By following the activation and programming sequences, you can receive text messages for "high bilge water," "refrigerator off," "engine started," and more. The unit can be shut down while you are on board to prevent unnecessary alarm notifications.

In my experience, Boatsense works very well and provides a simple, economical way to monitor vessel condition compared to some of the more elaborate systems available. I found it to be a practical addition to my center console and will be looking to install one in my trawler, as well.

The system does have its limitations — for example, both the message recipient and the boat must be in an area with a cellular signal. If Boatsense attempts to send a message and doesn't have the appropriate signal strength, it will continue attempting until the message is received. Fortunately, the brief text messages from the unit require minimal signal strength and duration, so this shouldn't be a problem in most areas.

I was disappointed that although the instructions recommend a 4-amp fuse be installed in the unit's 12-volt positive line, it isn't included. And though the instructions spell it out clearly, it's crucial to know that wiring Boatsense incorrectly will result in irreparable damage to the unit. I also would like to see an optional monthly or seasonal subscription as opposed to the annual service.

Boatsense is available in two versions, the original BSS2.1, which I evaluated, and the latest version, BSS3.1 with GPS, which wires to the boat's GPS and monitors a Geofence with a 100- to 9,999-foot radius. The Geofence can be customized to alarm at specific distances, text-messaging vessel position and speed.

The Boatsense 2.1 system retails for \$579, while the 3.1 system with GPS retails for \$979. Both prices include the first year's subscription fee, which includes 20 text messages per month. Additional messages are billed at 12 cents per message. Hamilton Marine — with locations in Portland, Rockland, Southwest Harbor and Searsport, Maine — is the exclusive distributor. Call (800) 639-2715 or visit www.hamiltonmarine.com. For additional information, visit www.boatsensesolutions.com.