

As a matter of safety some type of emergency beacon is a good idea. Especially here in the North where there is no Cell Phone coverage and very few other people. There are some expensive aviation dedicated options, but for private aviators there are some reasonable cost options. Here is my experience with two;

I have used a SPOT beacon for 4 or 5 years now. It was not without a few glitches but I never had a real emergency test of it.

Recently I acquired an InReach SE which I decided to try out. My experiences in setting up and using each follows;

Summary:

The SPOT beacon never let me down, worked when I wanted it to, and was economical.

The InReach has been a bit of a disappointment. It has failed to track when I thought it was. It is not intuitive and so people get confused in the normal operation (both my contacts and myself). That makes the attraction of a 'dialogue' with my contacts irrelevant. It is very expensive and now that Garmin owns it I know it won't get cheaper or more user friendly.

After a two year trial I am going back to SPOT and I plan to rent a Sattelite phone during the summer.

SPOT

There are 3 "Notification" buttons on the cover;

"911"

Pressing this button notifies SPOT of an emergency and they will notify the local Search and Rescue Coordination Center in the geographical location of the signal. To help with that I placed those numbers (RCMP and NavCanada) in the 911 message on my file.

My "911" message says;

"The owner of this SPOT flies aircraft registration CF-ABC. It is a Yellow and White Super Cub with a master flight plan on file at Nav Can Flight Services in Whitehorse Yukon (Phone 867-111-1111 to confirm this aircraft is in use). The aircraft is normally parked at 1111 Lodestar Lane. ELT ID is- _____."

"HELP"

This button allows SPOT to contact your designates and so, like above, I put as much detail into the message as I could to guide the response to problem I anticipated (like mechanical or low fuel). My message states;

"This IS NOT A LIFE THREATENING SITUATION, but I am unable to proceed and require appropriate assistance at the location that is shown....".

"OK"

This button notifies your list of people everything is “OK”. I found this important to let my crew know I was flying, and it gave them a link to allow them to track me (this turned out to be an important step before engaging the “TRACK” feature on my SPOT.

There is also a “**Track**” feature that is an important function, but does require some understanding and preparation. This is where I had most failures. If you are using one I recommend;

FIRST- Turn on your unit as you do your pre-flight. Let it find it’s position.

THEN- Send an ‘OK’ message before taking off. This puts everyone on your list on notice that you are moving. Teach them NOT to delete this message, they will need this link later to check your progress.

THEN- Wait until the ‘OK’ message has finished sending before engaging “Track” by holding the OK button down for 10 seconds...(Both green lights will flash at the same time and continue until it is shut off. (IF it reverts to only one flashing green light it was not tracking.)

WARNING - IF YOU USE THE WRONG TYPE OF BATTERIES ITS POSSIBLE TO GET BOTH GREEN LIGHTS FLASHING BUT NOT HAVE THE POWER TO TRANSMIT A LOCATION ! This happened to me between Fort Nelson and Calgary.

If I didn’t follow this procedure, it didn’t work. Many times I returned from a trip only to be told they didn’t know where I was, or occasionally even that I was flying at all because they were waiting for the “TRACK” that never came, or they didn’t know how to access!

SO, Who to Put on your list, is a critical decision. A responsible person who knows me and my activities well, and understands SPOT system can be hard to find. Also, like most of us I am occasionally negligent with updating my call-out list or training those on it. The messages can go to email addresses, or text messages by phone.

Be careful about using signals to indicate something special. Someone I know informed his wife that he would keep her up to date by sending an OK at a set time every day. Of course he missed one, and the wife panicked. That lady decided to notify the US Coast Guard who eventually located the target anchored near the hot springs South of Juneau. Another incident occurred once when two ‘OK’ messages in a row meant something special to a friends spouse. The wrong number of ‘OK’s were received, this led to anxiety, then activation of a formal search.

SPOT MISTAKES?

Should you accidentally send a ‘911’ or a ‘HELP’ message,.....immediately send an ‘OK’ message, then send one or even two more, spaced a little ways apart, and listen carefully anyway for the sound of the pesky helicopter.

SPOT is reasonably priced, about \$200 for the unit and \$200 / year to remain active (although I didn't appreciate the arbitrary "Management fee" they added to my bill last year?).

SPOT Observations:

The SPOT beacon I had was the first model. It was good on batteries, but it was easy to keep 2 NEW Lithium Ion AA's in the airplane and know it would never run out of power. (Except the one time I naively put new Alkaline AA's into it....thinking hey it would work for a short time.....it didn't, turns out only the LEDs worked !)

InReach SE

After having SPOT experience setting up the InReach was relatively simple. There is only one "SOS" button on the face, to be pressed in an emergency. Simple. There is an interactive screen, operated by two buttons, and a toggle switch.

You can program several pre-determined messages and have them available to send each simply. (That eliminates the need for the "OK" button and the "HELP" buttons on the SPOT.)

You can also enter a text message and send it instead. This goes faster if you pair it to your cell phone, but you don't have to. You can also receive a reply from any message that you instigate. THIS IS WHERE SE SHINES !

Set up is similar to the SPOT. Both beacons contact the regional Emergency Response Authority in the location of the use of SOS. I put as much local detail into the beacon (InReach provide a space for this "Information to rescuer" when you go online to activate and maintain your account).

InReach SE EXPERIENCE:

The InReach was about double the cost of the SPOT transmitter and double that for the annual subscription. I'm promised that I can temporarily deactivate for a time for a small fee if I am not using it.

The Tracks I have left so far seem adequate. They remain on the website until I make them invisible. The algorithm connects the dots so the line tends to zig-zag a bit. For people looking to follow your progress the web-site seems intuitive.

FINALLY:

Both beacons were placed high up in the front windshield, high up where they could see most of the sky, coverage seemed OK. (In fact they are running side-by-side as of this moment.)

I also fastened them on a little velcro clip so that I could take with me in a hasty departure....but I didn't test this.

After two years of use I found that frequently I would return to find the tracking had not functioned as expected. Sometimes there were gaps in the track and sometimes it dint track at all. I asked around and found this not uncommon among my friends who have an InReach..

My contacts seemed to have difficulty interacting with the messages properly and were often confused by where I was, what I was doing, or even surprised by the fact that I was flying on occasion.

I can't justify continuing like this, and, since it is cheaper to change hardware than family, it's back to simple plain old SPOT . I will try to get a Satellite phone to back it up.