

Emergency Communications for Non-Hams

Amateur radio can provide long range communication (voice or digital) in case of an emergency. But for local communication, there are options that do not require a radio license or certificate.

License-Exempt Devices

The [radiofrequency spectrum](#) is a scarce resource. In Canada, [ISED](#) regulates its use to prevent interference between different users. With respect to interference, there are two types of users:

1. *Primary* users are given priority of a frequency and are protected from interference.
2. *Secondary* users cannot interfere with primary users, and are not protected from interference.

For voice communications in Canada, [CB radios](#) and [FRS radios](#) are the two main license-exempt options. However, from [ISED FAQ #6](#):

It is illegal for consumers to import radio devices into Canada that do not bear a label with an Industry Canada certification/registration number.



License-exempt radios are *secondary* users.



Baofeng radios and the likes are illegal to use without the appropriate certificate.



Check if a certification/registration number is valid.

FRS

For voice, using an 📻 [FRS radio](#) is the most practical option.

Channels

There are 22 channels in the 462 and 467 MHz band:

Ch.	Frequency (MHz)	Max Power	Ch.	Frequency (MHz)	Max Power	Ch.	Frequency (MHz)	Max Power
1	462.5625	2 W	8	467.5625	0.5 W	15	462.5500	2 W
2	462.5875	2 W	9	467.5625	0.5 W	16	462.5750	2 W
3	462.6125	2 W	10	467.5875	0.5 W	17	462.6000	2 W
4	462.6375	2 W	11	467.6125	0.5 W	18	462.6250	2 W
5	462.6625	2 W	12	467.6375	0.5 W	19	462.6500	2 W
6	462.6875	2 W	13	467.6625	0.5 W	20	462.6750	2 W
7	462.7125	2 W	14	467.7125	0.5 W	21	462.7000	2 W
						22	462.7250	2 W



In Canada, repeater and high-power operations are not permitted, where as in the US, they are with a GMRS license.



In the US, Channels 15 – 22 are shared with licensed GMRS radios.



Each frequency has the same channel number regardless of the device brand.

CTCSS/DCS

To help quiet (squench) unwanted signals, FRS radios have the option of transmitting a CTCSS tone or DCS code (AKA: "PL tones", or "sub-audible tones"). These are low "bass notes" or digital information that the radio transmits on top of the voice, but which can't really be heard. If the receiver is configured to expect a specific tone/code, it will keep the speaker squelched unless that tone/code is detected. This is useful to ignore chatter from others on a busy channel, but if two radios with different tones transmit at the same time on the same channel, they will interfere with one another.

KOTFU has a really good article explaining all of this for FRS radios: [FRS/GMRS Privacy Codes Demystified](#), and [our own site](#) goes a little deeper in the context of ham radios.



Different brands of radios use different numbers to represent different tones/codes.



By default (and especially in an **emergency situation**), CTCSS/DCS should be **disabled** so that your radio can hear everyone.

Choosing a Radio

Here are three restrictions that preclude Baofeng radios from operating on FRS frequencies. From [ISED, RSS-210, Annex E](#):

- The antenna of FRS devices shall be an integral part of the unit.
- FRS/GMRS devices shall not:
 - be designed to interconnect to public switched telephone networks
 - be designed to transmit data in store-and-forward packet operation mode
 - incorporate one or more scrambling features (e.g. encryption, voice inversion, obscuring)
- All frequency determining circuitry, including crystals and programming controls, shall be internal to the transmitter and made inaccessible to the user from the exterior of the device.



FRS radios cannot be connected to a better antenna to extend the range, or be able to transmit on non-FRS frequencies.

There are a lot of “toy” FRS radios out there, so a good radio will tend to be a bit more expensive. The typical range could be anywhere from 1 km to 10 km depending on the terrain and elevation, but should not vary much from radio to radio. Here's a good explanation of what affects [range](#) in the context of ham radio.

Here's a short list of good radios at every price point:

- The [Rocky Talkie Mountain Radio](#) is \$220 USD each.
- The [Backcountry Access BC Link 2.0](#) is \$206 USD each.
- The [Retevis RB48](#) is \$115 CAD for a pair.
- The [Midland T10](#) is \$30 USD for a pair.

See the [Wirecutter site](#) for reviews and a list of what to avoid.

First Use Setup

Refer to the user manual for specific instructions, but in general, you should:

- Disable the *CTCSS/DCS* on all 22 channels. On the Retevis RB48, the CTCSS/DCS is represented by a number between 1 and 121 (on the right). The number 0 means that CTCSS or DCS is disabled.
- Disable the *Roger Beep*, which is short chirp that's transmitted when you let go of the PTT button to indicate that you're done talking. It can be pretty annoying for others.
- Disable *VOX*, which is an option to transmit without pressing the PTT.



MeshCore

From  [Wikipedia](#):

MeshCore is an open-source mesh networking protocol and software platform designed for off-grid, low-power text communication using LoRa (Long Range) radio technology. The system enables decentralized, multi-hop wireless messaging without reliance on cellular networks or internet infrastructure.

Use cases include emergency and disaster communications, outdoor and remote activities, [...] and experimental and educational deployments of low-power mesh networking.

[It] is designed to [...] operate in unlicensed  [ISM frequency bands](#) such as 868 MHz and 915 MHz, depending on regional regulations.



See [this page](#) for more information on how to get started.

The basic idea is that you get a small *companion device* that you pair to your cell phone via bluetooth, and via that device, you can text others or post public messages using the 915 MHz band, all without a special license.