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A life on the ocean wave(length)

- I'm in the Pacific! No, the PACIFIC!

By Bryan Betts

Sailors could soon be able to call home from the middle of the ocean on an ordinary GSM mobile phone, thanks to a tie-up between Blue Ocean Wireless (BOW) and Inmarsat-reseller Stratos Comms.

The companies have linked up with an as-yet unnamed GSM operator to put small GSM basestations, called picocells, onto merchant ships. Calls to or from the crew are backhauled over the ship's existing satellite connection - via Inmarsat, in this case. The system will also support SMS and data, the companies said.

Sailors will need to buy a pre-paid SIM to use the on-board network, according to Dublin-based BOW. The current plan is that the picocell will automatically turn itself off if it detects a land-based network, at which point the seafarers will need to swap back to their existing SIM cards.

There's no word yet on what calls and text messages sent from mid-ocean might cost, but a BOW spokesman hinted that they might not be as expensive as the public GSM networks that are already available on some ferries, for example.

He said that with good seafarers in short supply, systems such as this are installed by shipowners not to make a profit - like the ferry-based ones - but to keep the crew happy and improve staff retention.

"Crew are more picky now," he said. "They won't sail on a vessel that doesn't have email access, for example."

It also cuts the cost of running today's satphone-based crew calling schemes, and enables the shipping company and its customers to keep in touch with its cargo, he said.

Most containers already have GPRS-capable RFID tags attached. As well as location reporting, these can issue alarms if the container doors are opened, say, or if refrigerated goods don't stay refrigerated. Currently, the tags simply 'go dark' at sea, but with a GSM cell on board, they could provide reports anywhere.

The system is based on a picocell and gateway device from another Irish company, Altobridge, and has already been trialled on two container ships. Blue Ocean said it hopes to sell similar systems to the owners of luxury yachts and other sea-going ships as well.