

The Buzz at the Boat Show

Fort Lauderdale Offers a Gaggle of Gizmos

BY TONY BESSINGER

Last fall's Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show was rife with new-product announcements and teasers for electronics to be announced early in 2008. Below are some of the products I think will be of most interest to power cruisers in the coming year.



Furuno's new NavNet system features extraordinary 3D graphics, thanks to powerful processors and software. The author describes its performance as "seamless navigation."

By far the most buzz in the electronics tent at the Lauderdale show was created by Furuno's NavNet 3D, an Ethernet-based navigation software and hardware system. Its heart is a Multi Function Display (MFD) that is available in three sizes: 8.4", 12.1" and larger, custom monitors, the choice depending on boat (or dash) size. Each is combined with software from Furuno partner

MaxSea, one of the icons of digital navigation.

The resulting performance is the closest I've ever seen to seamless navigation (long promised but never quite delivered by any manufacturer). A powerful processor is part of the equation, as is plenty of RAM. (MFDs are more than displays; they're computers, and as such, they benefit from blazing speed and lots of memory).

Still, the main reason Furuno's NavNet 3D is so cool is that the system also boasts a graphics processor. As any computer-game aficionado can attest, smooth, realistic graphics come only with a top-shelf graphics card. The same holds true for digital charting, especially given the amount of information now available to today's navigator.

I strongly suggest that you

view the demo of Navnet 3D at www.navnet.com. Panning, zooming, adding radar overlays and even shifting to three-dimensional imaging are all instantaneous, with none of the pauses for redrawing we're all so used to. Moreover, the three-dimensional aspect of NavNet is the most visually appealing and useful I've seen. Whether you're using raster or vector charting — or Furuno's new satellite PhotoFusion (which has Google Earth-quality imagery), the 3D looks great. While old-school navigators might not think it's all that useful, many others — including those new to navigating — will embrace its ease of use.

What also makes NavNet 3D so terrific is its interface. The MFD is controlled via a panel of buttons on the right side of the screen (or, in the case of a large, custom monitor, via a separate but similarly located interface panel). The RotoKey, a rotary knob that controls an on-screen, revolving menu, is the heart of the interface, and in combination with MaxSea's excellent graphic interface, it makes NavNet an intuitive system that allows the user to keep his or her eyes on the screen rather than on a keyboard.

In short, Furuno's combining Japanese and American engineering with French software development has resulted in one of the most capable, user-friendly navigation systems ever offered to the civilian market. NavNet

3D won't be available until spring 2008, and prices had yet to be announced as we went to press in late November.

Walking and Talking

Sometimes it's not convenient (or safe) to be tethered to your fixed-mount VHF — or even to carry a handheld unit. Crouching over the radio or fumbling with a portable can be problematic during docking maneuvers, especially in the final few moments. That's why I particularly like the latest idea from Standard Horizon: a wireless headphone/microphone.

Using the short-range, wireless-communications Bluetooth protocol, Standard Horizon's new system works the same way as the ubiquitous cellphone headsets that have become popular in the last few years. There are two modes: push-to-transmit (PTT) or voice-operated (VOX), and the volume can be adjusted on the headset.

Before you run right out and order one, there are a few caveats (although these won't stop gadgeteers like me from getting one). First, the headset is designed to resist the

odd bit of spray and random raindrops, but it isn't totally waterproof. Second, the range is about 30 feet, so the unit won't work for somebody who's up on the bow of a 65-foot trawler. Third, with this first iteration, you can't change channels on the host radio or activate its squelch feature. The price is \$150, and more details are available at www.standardhorizon.com

Standard Horizon is also introducing two new handheld VHF radios for 2008: the HX750, which will float if dropped over the side, and the HX850S, which includes a GPS receiver and floats, as well. The former will sell for \$149, the latter for \$250. The advantages of a floating radio are obvious to any who has ever dropped a handheld into the drink. The benefits of a combination VHF/GPS may be harder to grasp, particularly for those still unfamiliar with Digital Select Calling (DSC).

This relatively new radio technology allows enhanced distress messages to be sent digitally. A unique nine-digit number is assigned to any DSC radio (a unit either equipped with a GPS or linked to one) that has reg-



The versatile new WxWorx Satellite Weather Receiver can be interfaced with a variety of onboard electronics to display highly detailed information.

istered the host boat's vital information (with the U.S. Coast Guard's national distress database) for use in emergency situations.

DSC radios have a one-button emergency transmit function that sends the vessel's unique MMSI number. If the DSC-equipped radio is linked to a GPS, the distress call includes the boat's position. DSC-equipped radios with an MMSI number can hail another DSC-equipped vessel, and only the boat being called will receive the message. Visit www.standardhorizon.com for more information.

Whither the Weather?

I also took a close look at WxWorx's new XM Radio XM WX Satellite Weather Receiver, a mouthful of a modular system that, depending on how it's configured, will be able to communicate with MFDs, chartplotters and other displays via Bluetooth, Ethernet, USB or RS-232 protocols.

The new unit can also take power from a USB or

Ethernet port, which reduces wiring clutter and helps simplify installation. That said, a DC power plug is included, and an AC plug is available at additional cost. All these new features give the XM WX receiver more capabilities, including the option of using the receiver on your power cruiser during the summer months, then at home in the off-season.

After returning from Fort Lauderdale, I arranged for a test unit, which took only about an hour to set up, including the trip to my roof to mount the marine antenna. Even using my four-year-old Toshiba Satellite laptop (with a Pentium IV processor), I was quickly downloading live weather information from the entire United States, with zooming ability down to street level.

Front positions, radar and satellite images, wave-height forecasts, sea-surface temperatures, surface wind speeds and directions, buoy data, lightning strikes, weather warnings and more were all on the screen. Moreover, I



Standard Horizon has introduced two new floating, waterproof handheld radios (top), as well as a wireless, Bluetooth VHF headphone/microphone (above).

had the ability to toggle on and off whatever I wanted to see. This system is a great addition to any home- or boat-based system, especially because it gives you the ability to transfer the unit between the boat and the house.

If you'd only like to use the receiver on board, you can suspend your XM WX payments during the winter months by changing your subscription to the "End of Season" package. This enables city forecasts, surface observations and county warnings with no monthly charge. Then, at the start of the next boating season, you can shift back a higher-level XM WX service package with no activation fee.

The Weather Receiver WxWorx on Water kit includes the base receiver,



Maps showing sea-surface temperatures are readily available via the WxWorx unit.

USB interface module, digital marine antenna, WxWorx on Water software

and mounting hardware. It lists for \$999.98, and a monthly subscription for the

company's Sailor Package is \$29.99. Visit www.wxworx.com for more details. ⚙️