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Title: Preventing Fatalities Due to Falls Overboard: Evaluating Personal Flotation Devices

Authors: Lucas DL, Lincoln JM, Anderson P

Purpose

Falls overboard are a major contributor to commercial fishing fatalities. A recent study found that there were 71 fatal falls overboard from commercial fishing vessels in Alaska during 1990-2005. None of the victims were wearing a personal flotation device (PFD). Anecdotal evidence from fishermen and marine safety experts show that some of the most common objections among fishermen to wearing PFDs are that they are bulky, heavy, hot, and generally uncomfortable. NIOSH designed a two-part study focusing on the issue of PFD use.

Methodology

The study consists of two parts: first, a survey of 400 fishermen in Southwest Alaska to measure perceptions of the risk of falling overboard, safety attitudes, beliefs about PFDs, and experiences with falls overboard; and second, an evaluation and rating of six modern PFDs by 216 commercial fishermen to discover the features and qualities that they like and dislike. Fishermen on four different types of fishing vessels will be randomly selected to participate.

Results

Data collection is currently underway. Fishermen have been supportive of the study and willing to participate. Both phases have been completed with three of the four types of vessels. Researchers achieved response rates on the Phase 1 survey ranging from 94 to 100 percent. Response rates for the phase 2 PFD evaluation ranged from 86 to 95 percent. Data collection will be completed in June 2009 and data analysis will immediately follow.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Findings from this project will be disseminated to fishermen, marine safety organizations, and PFD manufacturers with the goal of increasing PFD use among fishermen. With the empirical data in hand, safety professionals may be better equipped to address fishermen's concerns and remove the barriers that are currently in place.