

## **CHAPTER I WORKSHOP OPENING**

### **INTRODUCTION**

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Welcome everyone. I am delighted to be able to join you to kick off this important Second National Fishing Industry Safety and Health Workshop.

I know that many of you are familiar with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, or NIOSH, but I thought it might be useful for those of you less familiar for me to begin with a brief overview of NIOSH, of what we are doing in general and then focus on some of our activities in fishing, about which you'll hear much greater detail in the next two days.

NIOSH and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, have a common history in that both were created by the same legislative act. NIOSH has a very different and separate mandate from OSHA, however. We have essentially no regulatory nor enforcement responsibilities, and our responsibilities really fall in the realm of: conducting research; providing what we call health hazard evaluations and technical assistance to workers, employees, state and local agencies; making a scientific basis for recommending standards; and training occupational safety and health professionals. I think the creators of the Occupational Safety and Health Act were really quite wise in the sense that they separated OSHA's regulatory and enforcement activities into a completely different department in the government with NIOSH in Health and Human Services and OSHA in Labor.

NIOSH is geographically quite spread out. Our headquarters are in Washington, D.C., and we have our original field offices and major research laboratories in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Morgantown, West Virginia. We recently added the laboratories of two functions that were formerly part of the Bureau of Mines, one in Spokane, Washington, and the other in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. We have some smaller regional offices and, of course, an important office relevant to today's discussion, the NIOSH Alaska Field Station.

I want to put into context the significant issue of injuries, illnesses, and fatalities in commercial fishing relative to the overall national picture, using NIOSH-based surveillance data. With the National Traumatic Occupational Fatalities (NTOF) system, NIOSH has been able to track overall trends, including state and regional trends in the United States, by industry and occupation. We have found that occupational fatality rates in Alaska are dramatically high. In the national distribution, with the lowest fatality rates in the Northeast and with Washington state in the middle ground, a few

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other states come close, but none as high as Alaska. When you look at the actual rates for the state, a lot of the clustering of that danger is in the industry sector of agriculture, forestry, and fishing.

These high rates led NIOSH to establish the Alaska Field Station. I'm delighted that they've taken the lead in this area and are working with many partners, as we'll discuss in a moment. This is an office that's still relatively young; it was created in 1991. George Conway, who leads the office, will be sharing some of their significant accomplishments a little later.

The NIOSH Alaska Field Station was set up to use a public health approach to the problems of injuries particularly, but also of illness for workers in Alaska. From the outset the Alaska Field Station took the lead for NIOSH in trying to demonstrate the power of partnerships with other agencies as well as other interested sectors in terms of being able to leverage activities, resources, and actions to prevent this high toll of injury and illness.

The Alaska Interagency Working Group for the Prevention of Occupational Injuries has been involved in a number of activities. For example, the helicopter logging story, although not directly germane to fishing, is an interesting one. At the time that the Working Group was formed, helicopter logging was taking off in Alaska. About 16 percent of all helicopters were actually involved in crashes in a year. Since the formation of the Working Group and their multiple activities and recommendations during 1993, there has been only one crash. This shows the remarkable ability to make a difference when you target a high risk sector.

I want to also mention the relatively new addition to the NIOSH portfolio of an agricultural research center in Seattle, Washington, which serves as a regional center that includes Alaska. It is one of eight centers that comes out of a broad-based congressional initiative that addresses research and prevention for the high toll of injuries and illnesses in the agricultural sector, which is configured broadly and does include forestry and fishing. The Pacific Northwest Agricultural Safety and Health Center is now less than one-year old and has had a highly successful start. Some of the members of the Center are in the audience today. We strongly encourage their intention to enhance the activities to date that deal with commercial fishing.

NIOSH has just released a Current Intelligence Bulletin on commercial fishing. Our surveillance data indicated over 400 occupational fatalities occurred in Alaska from 1991-1996. I should mention that this same surveillance effort has looked into serious injuries in over 2,500 cases, as well. In perspective, the occupational fatality rate for commercial fishing in Alaska is 20 times that of the overall U.S. occupational fatality rate. Despite these dramatic numbers, there have been improvements, but there's certainly still room for more. In the last 5-year period, as detailed for you in the Current Intelligence Bulletin, there has been a one-third reduction in the number of fishing fatalities, which are mostly due to drownings resulting from falling overboard, sinkings, or capsizing events. Interestingly, the number of vessels lost has stayed roughly the same. In our epidemiologic jargon, this demonstrates an improvement in the "case fatality rate", although the risk of a vessel being lost has remained constant, the odds of surviving that event have improved.

This improvement can be attributed to many factors. For example, you're going to be hearing shortly from Mrs. Barry, who had an important role in passage of the Commercial Fishing Industry Vessel Safety Act of 1988.

In addition to the safety issues and the high rate of injuries in commercial fishing, I've had personal experience, when I was at the University of Washington in Seattle before going to Washington, D.C., in dealing with some very serious respiratory illness problems among fish-processing workers. NIOSH is preparing to evaluate this situation in cooperation with one of the land-based processors.

I've personally taken care of a number of very young workers who have gotten such severe asthma that they've been effectively disabled from working, not just in the commercial fishing industry, but when diagnosed too late in the game, from having effective employment in virtually any industry. As in the case of drownings, better etiologic research, intervention investigations, and prevention would help us address this serious public health problem.

I mentioned the NIOSH Current Intelligence Bulletin earlier, which you'll be discussing more over the next few days. This document contains a series of recommendations to either implement or evaluate a number of actions that, based on the science as we now know it, should improve the health and safety of commercial fishing. These fall into many areas, such as examining training issues, looking at issues of guidelines for staffing and watch keeping, and evaluating training of crews as well as skippers. The recommendations also suggest consideration of labor/management policies that have to do with health and safety and trying to make them more integral to the overall effort by improving monitoring of sea and weather conditions, continuing development of personal flotation devices, and implementing and evaluating man-overboard alarms.

I would like to close by identifying the issue of trying to reach out and work with a broad array of stakeholders including industry, labor, other federal, state, and local agencies, health professionals, academia, and the public. This is an approach that NIOSH has increasingly used, we think to great success, not just in this arena, but really in all of our missions.

Perhaps our most notable accomplishment recently in terms of partnership is the National Occupational Research Agenda, known as NORA. This was an effort where NIOSH, starting several years ago with remarkably broad input from over 500 individuals and organizations, developed a national research agenda for the next 10 years, not just for NIOSH but for the country as a whole. I think we were able to demonstrate that although sometimes the world of the workplace is polarized, with tensions between labor and management and tensions between regulators and researchers, this broad community had a strong and quite impressive consensus about the top research priorities. And this wasn't just doing research for research's sake. This whole process was geared to doing research in areas where we thought we could learn enough to ultimately have a measurable impact in decreasing illness and injury.

We ended up with 21 priorities in three different categories. We anticipated at the very beginning of the process that with any given work sector, one could target appropriate NORA priority areas. For example, in agriculture, top priorities include injuries, asthma, reproductive abnormalities, and hearing loss. This type of sector approach in occupational safety and health research has already been very effective for promoting research and preventive actions.

I'd like to share my personal rough cut of the NORA priority areas most applicable to commercial fishing. For example, respiratory disease and asthma, as I've already noted, is a real concern and very much understudied. Obviously, musculoskeletal concerns and traumatic injuries should be included. I think there are some other priority areas that intersect very nicely with the work before you in the next two days. These include looking at issues about how work is organized (issues of when people work and the conditions of their employment, whether it be part-time work, shift work, or contingent employment), looking at who's doing the work, recognizing the changing workforce and demographics in the United States, as well as trying to get much smarter in a variety of research tools and approaches that we think will have a beneficial effect (such as trying to improve technologies that promote worker health at the front end of production rather than after we've identified them as problems).

I appreciate the opportunity to make these introductory remarks and put some of NIOSH's broader work in context. I also truly appreciate the work of our NIOSH Alaska Field Station staff who are here and who I get to see all too rarely, since we are very much separated by distance. It's nice to meet in the middle, in Seattle.

Thank you.

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