



Mariner's Seabag

FISHING VESSEL FATALITY CAUSES AND MAN OVERBOARD

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When one thinks of the most dangerous waters in the United States and the most prevalent cause of death for commercial fishermen, capsizing in the Bering Sea would most likely come to mind. Major casualties in Alaska such as the “A” boats, the Aleutian Enterprise, and most recently the Arctic Rose, have underscored the risks involved with fishing in Alaska.

However, in a survey of U.S. Coast Guard fishing vessel casualties in the six-year period from 1995 to 2000, the major cause of fishing fatalities was found *not* to be from boats capsizing, flooding, grounding or catching fire. The vessels involved in the largest segment of commercial fishing fatalities were, in fact, intact. Surprisingly, almost a third of all fishing related deaths during this period, 122 out of a total of 380, were due to man overboard events—35 percent occurring in the Gulf of Mexico. These figures show that man overboard events in the Gulf of Mexico were the leading cause of fatalities in the last six years in the U.S. fishing industry, accounting for 11 percent of all fishing fatalities. The second leading cause of fishing related deaths in the U.S. were capsizing events in Alaska, accounting for 7 percent of all fatalities.

The Coast Guard analysis includes only fishing related fatalities from heart attacks or other natural causes, alcohol or drug overdoses, suicides or other unknowns are not included. Some fatalities from “unknown” causes were probably due to either sinking or capsizing since the entire vessel was lost. However, the unknowns were few in number and would have altered the results by only a few percentage points.

The following table displays the leading causes of fishing vessel fatalities from 1995 through 2000.

<i>CAUSE</i>	<i>FATALITIES</i>
MAN OVERBOARD	122
SINKING	16
CAPSIZING	74
DECK-RELATED INJURY	31
COLLISION	12
DIVER RELATED	17
FIRE	8
TOTAL	380

Since man overboard events are such a significant hazard to commercial fishermen, prevention steps and procedures should be emphasized.

Safe deck work practices are of paramount importance. Non-slip surfaces must be maintained. Fatigue may also be a factor in man overboard incidents and work schedules should be adjusted to make the most of rest periods. Training crews to effectively respond to a man overboard emergency should be a part of every fishing vessel’s monthly emergency drill. Man overboard alarms are available on the market that set off an alarm in the wheelhouse when the wearer of the sending unit falls in the water.

Most importantly, life jackets should be worn when on deck. USCG approved or unapproved life jackets come in a variety of styles, including vests, suspenders, belt pouches and more traditional styles. “It is too bulky to work in,” is no longer an excuse for not wearing a life jacket because there is a design for almost any working situation. In the last six years at least 122 fishermen would have had a better chance had they been wearing one.

Which is the best life jacket? The answer is still “the one you will wear.”

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Front cover:

The grounded fishing vessel *Marlu*. Photo by MST2 Jason Wishart of Marine Safety Field Office, Cape Cod, MA.

Back cover:

Galapagos Island Oil Spill, Puerto Moreno on Isla San Cristobal; The F/V *Jessica* spilled about 200,000 gallons of oil into an environment known for unique wildlife and aquatic species on Jan. 16, 2001. The accident was caused by heavy seas and constant swells.