

Fishing fatalities: Were lessons learned?

The year 2004 ended sadly with elected officials joining hundreds of fishermen and their families in mourning the loss of five men aboard the 75' Northern Edge when the scalloper went down on Dec. 20.

Among the mourners was Pedro Furtado, 22, the sole survivor who jumped from the sinking vessel and managed to get to and inflate the life raft.

Just one year earlier, on Dec. 13, 2003, three New Bedford fishermen were lost when the 72' scalloper Atlanta sank. Since that time, in addition to the Northern Edge crew, there have been three deaths in the New England region. On Aug. 26, tuna fisherman Bradley Richardson of Chatham, MA and his boat, the 33' Avaricious, disappeared.

That incident was followed by the loss of Wayne Ingham, 54, and Michael Leonardo, 45, both of Fairhaven, MA, who perished on Sept. 3 when the 37' clam vessel Nancy Christine rolled over and sank.

All 11 fishermen left grieving family and friends wondering what went wrong. The Avaricious sent no distress call or EPIRB signal and nothing from the vessel was recovered. The inflatable life raft belonging to the Nancy Christine was found during the search and apparently inflated automatically as designed, but the crew did not abandon ship.

The sinking of the 44' Canadian Mist qualified as one of a number of near-misses in 2004 that were the result of

more favorable circumstances and luck for sure, but also because of proper safety preparation on the part of the crew.

On Nov. 4, after taking a series of waves over the stern, the vessel was swamped. The four fishermen aboard had just enough time to place a distress call, don their survival suits, and jump.

The life raft inflated and they were able to get into it. Signals from the EPIRB guided Coast Guard rescuers to the fishermen's position.

A different story

For the Northern Edge, in 8'-10' seas off Nantucket, the story was different. When the dredge of the scalloper apparently got hung down, the boat listed to starboard and was swamped by a wave.

The survival suits reportedly were not accessible and it appears that several of the fishermen who died did not believe they would survive if they jumped toward the life raft.

Furtado, who reportedly had some safety training, took the chance and jumped. Even without his survival suit, he was able to inflate the raft and hold on.

The situation was complicated by a regulation that apparently convinced the captain to make one last tow rather than break off the trip and lose the opportunity to take the scallops the vessel was allowed.

This regulation was in itself a safety hazard because it created a strong

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financial incentive to stay out to fill the trip allowance even in bad weather.

Unfortunately, every day in every industry, economic concerns can sometimes override safety.

Taking action

Now fishermen, safety experts, and regulators are trying to decide what can be done to prevent another disaster.

Among the steps being discussed are increased use of dockside exams by captains, safety/survival training, and regulatory changes. Dockside exams help ensure that survival suits are accessible for everyone and that life rafts and EPIRBs are operable. Examiners also check many other safety-related items.

Safety and survival training provided by an independent third party remove the responsibility for safety drills from a crew member. This training could and should be required of scallopers and phased-in over the next four to five years.

Members of Congress are calling for changes in regulations and such changes

are being considered by fishermen and regulators.

Good regulations promote both the safety and survival of the fishermen as well as the sustainability of fish stocks. In the meantime, it remains up to vessel owners, captains, and individual crewmembers to do all they can to ensure the safety of those who go to sea.

FISH SAFE:

- Check your vessel, survival equipment, and the crew's emergency plan knowledge.
- Request a dockside exam from your local Coast Guard Marine Safety Office (MSO).
- Check with your local Coast Guard MSO about taking a safety/survival training course.
- Advocate for regulations that promote safety as well as sustainability.

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