



## ***FINDINGS OF CONCERN***

### **Sector Delaware Bay**

December 22, 2025  
Philadelphia, PA

Findings of Concern 022-25

## **Improper Loading of Traps Onboard Commercial Fishing Vessel Adversely Impacts Stability**

Purpose. The U.S. Coast Guard issues findings of concern to disseminate information related to unsafe conditions that were identified as causal factors in a casualty and could contribute to future incidents. Findings of concern are intended to educate the public, state, or local agencies about the conditions discovered so they may address the findings with appropriate voluntary actions and to highlight existing applicable company policies or state/local regulations.

The Incident. A commercial fishing vessel (CFV) departed from its home port of Cape May, New Jersey, with two people aboard to fish for conch approximately 15 nautical miles offshore in the North Atlantic Ocean. The vessel, a 31-foot Chesapeake Bay deadrise, was operated by the owner and a crewmember, who recovered and rebaited approximately 90 traps. During fishing operations, the majority of the traps were stowed on the vessel's port side while the starboard side was used to haul up and deploy traps.

While attempting to hook the line for the buoy marking the final trap, the buoy line broke and drifted aft, eventually fouling the vessel's propeller. As the master worked to free the propeller, waves swamped the transom area, flooding it with seawater. The aft deck became increasingly inundated, causing the vessel to heel to port—likely a result of its unbalanced and overloaded condition. The owner/operator shouted to the crewmember to begin throwing traps overboard to lighten the load and then pushed the throttle ahead in an effort to drain water from the aft deck. At that moment, the vessel began to capsize to port, forcing both occupants into the ocean before they could don lifesaving gear. Ultimately, the owner/operator was rescued by a good Samaritan vessel, but the crewmember was tragically lost at sea and is presumed deceased.

Contributing Factors and Analysis. The investigation identified the following contributing factors:

1. The vessel was overloaded and improperly (asymmetrically) loaded with conch traps, which adversely affected its intact stability.
2. The vessel did not have a stability manual, stability instructions, or a stability test.

Findings of Concern. Coast Guard investigators have identified the following voluntary measures to mitigate the risks associated with the contributing factors identified above:

- Owners/operators of CFVs less than 79 feet in length are highly encouraged to utilize the stability instruction requirements for CFVs 79 feet or more in length outlined in Title 46 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Section 28.530.



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- Owners, operators, and masters of conch vessels under 79 feet in length—common in the commercial conch fishing industry—often lack specialized training in vessel stability. It is strongly recommended that they attend formal stability training, which should cover principles related to overloading and improper loading that can adversely affect weight distribution, deck drainage, and other industry-specific safety concerns. Relevant topics may include, but are not limited to, stacking traps (pots), loading traps on one side of the vessel, and ensuring sufficient freeing ports are in place to rapidly drain water shipped onto main deck.

Closing. These findings of concern are provided for informational purposes only and do not relieve any domestic or international safety, operational, or material requirements. For any questions or comments please contact the Sector Delaware Bay Investigations Division by email at [PhillyIO@uscg.mil](mailto:PhillyIO@uscg.mil).