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Fishing Vessel Leif; July 6, 2005. Official U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer Chris Leibrant

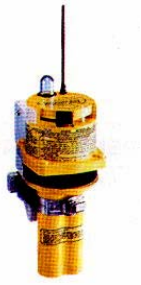
It Takes More Than Having Survival Equipment to Survive

Commercial fishing is one of the most dangerous occupations in the U.S. At one point, it was seven times more dangerous than the average U.S. industry and twice as dangerous as mining, the next most dangerous industry.

From 1981 through 1991, there were 1154 fatalities, an average of 105 per year. During this time, 76% of fishing fatalities resulted from water exposure.

The Commercial Fishing Industry Vessel Safety Act was passed in 1988. In 1991 the Coast Guard issued regulations addressing safety and survival equipment, training, and periodic drills among other things.

Since the regulations, were promulgated significant progress has been made in reducing fatalities, in part because of the carriage of survival equipment. But, carrying the emergency equipment is only part of the solution to the high number of fatalities resulting from water exposure. Regular maintenance, training and, most importantly, practice drills are just as critical to crew survival. The equipment is useful only if it is properly maintained and the crew can quickly and properly use it in an emergency.



The regulations require trained drill conductors to hold a series of monthly drills where emergency equipment, including survival equipment, is actually used. The requirement is intended to ensure the crew can locate needed emergency equipment, that the equipment is functioning properly, and the crew is proficient in its use. The trained drill conductor is required to ensure the equipment is used properly and the crew works together as a team.

The most recent statistics show that from 1994 through 2004, there were 641 fatalities, or 58 per year. That is a 45% drop in fatalities. This suggests that the regulations requiring safety and survival equipment have had the intended effect.

From 1994 through 2004, the primary event leading to water exposure fatalities was vessel loss (328), followed by falling overboard (154). Of the 328 fatalities resulting from vessel loss, 234 occurred in cold water areas and the usage rates of survival suits/PFDs (shown below) was relatively low.

SURVIVAL RATE COMPARISON			
West And Northeast Coasts of the U.S., 1994 - 2004			
Survival Suit Usage	**In water**	**Survivors**	**Survival Rate**
Used	87	53	**61%**
Not Used	191	51	27%
Unknown	66	6	N.A.
Overall	**344**	**110**	**32%**

You are more than twice as likely to survive a vessel loss when lifesaving equipment is used.

Of the 34 fatalities where survival suits were used, they were damaged, did not fit, or were not completely donned. This highlights the importance of maintaining lifesaving equipment and practicing its use.

Of the 51 survivors who did not use survival suits, 17 were saved by using a life raft. EPIRBs and radios were only used in 35% of the sinkings.

Many of these fatalities may have been prevented if the required emergency equipment had been used. You must commit to not only maintain, but learn how to use lifesaving and survival equipment in an emergency. When seconds count, training and hands-on drills will make the difference.

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