



UNITED STATES COAST GUARD
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

FINDINGS OF CONCERN

Office of Investigations and Casualty Analysis

January 2, 2024
Washington, DC

Findings of Concern 001-24

COMMERCIAL FISHING CAN BE DANGEROUS FOR THE UNPREPARED

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 an appropriate voluntary action or highlight existing applicable company policies or state/local regulations.

The Incident: Late in the evening of December 31, 2019, a commercial fishing/crabbing vessel capsized and sank south of the Aleutian Island Chain just south of Sutwik Island, Alaska. The vessel was in transit in forecasted heavy freezing spray conditions while carrying 195 crab pots and gear to the fishing grounds north of the Aleutian Island Chain. The sudden capsizing and sinking resulted in the deaths of five of the seven-person crew.

Contributing Factors and Analysis: As a result of the formal investigation, the Coast Guard identified several factors, discussed individually below, that increased the risk to crewmembers and decreased the crewmembers' readiness to respond to emergencies.

- This investigation revealed that several crewmembers had significant medical issues and that the managing owner was unaware of the extent of those issues prior to the vessel departing port. These medical issues could have been exacerbated in the challenging maritime environment of Alaska and similar areas. The pressures of commercial fishing operations likely reduce management's ability to focus on these types of risks to vessel operations. While these medical issues were not found as a direct cause of the casualty, they greatly increased the risk to the crewmembers once the vessel capsized.
- During post casualty drug testing following this incident, one of the two surviving crewmembers tested positive for marijuana, THC. The same crewmember was tested prior to the voyage and their tests results were reported back to the company as negative. It is the opinion of the Marine Board of Investigation that the initial test for this crewmember was most likely positive however the results were reported as negative due to the pressure to get underway with a full complement of crew. While this may not have directly contributed to the cause of the accident, it may have impacted the safe operation of the vessel considering this crewmember was in a safety sensitive position as the navigation watch directly preceding the watch when the incident occurred.
- During the analysis of a survivor's work-rest history, it was identified that the level of fatigue experienced by the crewmember would have been equivalent to legal intoxication by alcohol. Due to the nature of the work, there is a strong likelihood that the deckhands experienced a sleep deficit while the vessel was at sea. Despite the uncertainty of fatigue's



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impact on this accident, research has shown that fatigue leads to errors in decision making and decreased motor skills reducing the crewmembers' ability to respond during an emergency.

- This investigation revealed that the vessel did not have any written procedures relating to the safe operations of the vessel. Companies that operate fishing vessels without developed written procedures, especially those with multiple employees and operators, may create situations that lead to latent unsafe conditions due to misunderstanding of roles and expectations for important duties.

Findings of Concern: Coast Guard investigators have identified several measures that may mitigate the risks posed by the issues discussed above. All commercial fishing vessel owners and operators should consider the following voluntary measures:

- While there are no medical fitness requirements to operate a commercial fishing vessel of the ship particulars in this casualty, owners and operators should consider medical conditions in employment of personnel and how disclosed medical conditions may be further exacerbated by extreme weather and fatigue. Special attention should be paid for crew assigned to safety sensitive positions.
- Although boating under the influence laws (Title 33, Code of Federal Regulations Part 95) state a person should not be under the influence of drug or alcohol while operating the vessel, there is no explicit requirement for commercial fishing vessels to have a drug and alcohol program, except for post-casualty testing. This leaves a gap where owners or operators may unknowingly hire individuals that routinely operate vessels under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Owners and operators should adopt pre-employment drug screening programs that are timely and do not place unnecessary pressure on captains to rush testing for a last-minute hire.
- Understanding the "time is money" moniker, there are direct impacts on the safety of the vessel and crew when fatigue is ignored. Owners and operators are encouraged to establish work schedules that consider the effects of fatigue. Specifically, for crew in safety sensitive positions.
- Owners and operators should consider developing written procedures to operate their vessels safely with due regard to the intended service and fishery of the vessel and ensure that all employees within the company are thoroughly familiar with these policies and procedures.

Closing: These Findings of Concern are provided for informational purpose only and do not relieve any domestic or international safety, operational, or material requirements. For any questions or comments regarding these Findings of Concern please contact the Coast Guard Office of Investigations and Casualty Analysis via email at HQS-SMB-CG-INV@uscg.mil.