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Arctic Rose report may have lasting impact on fishing

By Mike Carter

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The Coast Guard panel investigating the sinking of the Arctic Rose trawler recommended in its final report yesterday that fishing vessels have alarms on all watertight doors, that the industry require additional safety training, and that more boats undergo stability testing before fishing some of the most dangerous waters in the world.

The panel also adopted the conclusion of marine engineers who determined the Arctic Rose most likely sank after its inexperienced crew left open a rear hatch, allowing seawater to flood the boat. Fifteen men died that day in April 2001, making it the worst U.S. fishing accident in more than a half-century.

In adopting the most likely of 19 sinking scenarios, the panel concluded that the Seattle-based boat probably capsized in less than three minutes and then sank in fewer than eight minutes after flooding began.

In all, the Marine Casualty Board, which spent 2½ years investigating the accident in the remote Bering Sea, forwarded 31 recommendations to Coast Guard Commandant Thomas H. Collins.

While Collins already has concurred with almost all of them, he rejected the panel's call that several rule changes be made mandatory. Collins concluded that current Coast Guard policies and regulations are adequate in some cases, and other changes could be made more quickly if they were voluntary.

His response was met with disappointment by some fishing industry observers.

"It is extraordinarily disappointing that the commandant is again calling for a voluntary approach," said Richard Hiscock, a former fisherman and industry expert who has written numerous papers on the history of fishing safety.

"This was the same approach the Coast Guard has taken since 1984 and its response to the 'A-boat' casualties," he said, referring to one of the last major U.S. fishing accidents — the sinkings of the twin Anacortes-based fishing boats Altair and Americus in 1983 that killed 14 crewmen. "It hasn't worked."

Capt. Ronald Morris, the head of the Marine Safety Office in Anchorage and the chairman of the Arctic Rose Marine Casualty Board, said he hoped the investigation and the board's recommendations would save lives.

"We hope this will help to prevent a similar accident from happening," Morris said.

The Coast Guard panel members met with the families of several crew members earlier yesterday to review the findings before releasing them to the public.

David Rundall, the father of Arctic Rose skipper Dave Rundall, hopes the release of the Coast Guard report "will be the beginning of the end of our family's nightmare."

"It's been a long time coming, but I believe they probably came up with what actually happened out there," said Rundall, of West Seattle. "I just hope that all of this will keep someone else from having to go through what we've been through. The recommendations are good. But once it gets into the political arena, who knows what will happen."

Morris, the head of the investigative panel, said yesterday that he would not question the commandant's decision not to adopt the recommendation that some changes be mandated by regulation or law.

"We made the recommendation. The commandant makes the final decision," he said. The most significant recommendation sought to end certain Coast Guard regulations that exempt some fishing vessels from stability testing.

The Arctic Rose was built in 1988 as a shrimp boat in the Gulf Coast. The boat underwent numerous structural changes that included adding a processing factory on its aft deck. More recently, several tons of ballast was added. Testimony during hearings held by the panel in Seattle and Anchorage suggested the boat was regularly being operated outside the recommendations of its "stability letter" — the loading guidelines recommended by naval architects.

Morris and the other two members of the panel — all experts in marine safety — also recommended that the Coast Guard require water-tight and weather-tight doors be equipped with alarms that would alert the skipper of the boat when one was left open. Commercial vessels are required to have such alarms, said Morris.

"We concur with the intent of this recommendation," the commandant's office wrote in response. "However, we believe that the development and implementation of a voluntary compliance program

rather than attempting to publish regulatory requirements is more appropriate and more likely to be completed faster and with better success."

Likewise, the commandant's office also said it would ask the fishing fleet to voluntarily install high-water alarms in processing factories, where fish are sliced and prepared for freezing, and other sensitive areas, such as the engine room.

The Arctic Rose was among the smallest of the "head and gut" fleet, whose unglamorous name refers to how the fish are beheaded, eviscerated and prepared for freezing after they're hauled on board. The investigators believe the Arctic Rose was actually processing fish by also cutting off their tails and fins, and therefore could have fallen into a category of ship that is more closely regulated by the Coast Guard.

Ed Luttrell, executive director of the Groundfish Forum, a Seattle-based trade association representing the roughly two dozen boats in the head-and-gut fleet, said he had not read the whole report and that it was too early to say what impact the board's recommendations might have on the industry.

"I will say that we work closely with all of our regulators and will be giving them our input," he said.

The Coast Guard already has acted on some other findings from the Arctic Rose investigation, including fixing a glitch in global-communications systems that hampered efforts to contact another ship in the vicinity of the Arctic Rose when it sank.

The Coast Guard and the owner of the Arctic Rose, David Olney, tried numerous times to contact another of his boats, the Alaskan Rose, which was operating in the same area, after the Arctic Rose's emergency beacon was activated.

The investigation found that the urgent status of several e-mails sent to the Alaskan Rose was automatically downgraded by glitches in communications software.

Moreover, the investigators found that the Alaskan Rose was not properly equipped with an alarm to alert the pilot of the boat when an urgent message arrived.

As a result, the Coast Guard also will likely require updated radio and e-mail systems aboard fishing vessels.

The investigation into the sinking of the boat is one of the most arduous and expensive ever undertaken by the Coast Guard. Investigators enlisted the U.S. Navy to find the wreckage — in 428 feet of water 200 miles northwest of St. Paul Island on the desolate Zemchung Flats — and then took two trips to photograph it using submersible equipment. The first trip ended when a robotic camera worth tens of thousands of dollars hung up on lines floating off the wreckage and had to be cut loose.

The second trip, however, captured footage of the open door on the aft trawl deck, and likely solved the mystery of why the boat went down.

The investigators also keyed in on the inexperience of the crew — three of the crew were Mexicans working under assumed names and had no maritime experience — as a "causal" factor in the sinking.

The Arctic Rose was described by former crew members as a "little boat in a big-boat fishery" and its place in the wild Bering Sea, fishing among factory trawlers often two or three times its size, was questioned. It was a ship that operated, they said, on a thin profit and safety margin.

But there also was testimony that Rundall was almost obsessive about safety on the boat and rode his young crew hard.

Among the other recommendations:

- Simplify loading and stability diagrams so they can more easily be read and understood by the crew.
- Develop minimal safety indoctrination programs for first-time crew members.
- Give the crew of the Alaskan Rose a Public Service Award for their rescue and recovery efforts.

The panel also singled out the heroism of John Nelson, the first mate on the Alaskan Rose, who dived into the sea to retrieve Rundall's body — the only body recovered from the debris field when rescuers arrived.

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