

# USA fisheries, too many casualties?

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Lack of regulations and the pressure to catch a boat's allocated quota can lead to accidents at sea

As I'm writing these words, somewhere off Alaskan coast the U.S. Coast Guard 63-year old cutter *Storis* is towing to safety a 67-year old 360-foot fish processing ship *Independence* that lost her steering and was drifting in 50-60 knots winds with 204 people on board, but no reports of injuries. It seems that this time the drama is going to have a happy end.

Not all marine accidents involving fishing vessels conclude so happily. Bill Hogarth, Director of the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) - wrote in February 2005 on the NMFS website: "We were deeply saddened to end 2004 and start off 2005 with the sinking of commercial fishing vessels that claimed the lives of five scallop fishermen in New England, six snow crab fishermen in Alaska, and a shrimper in Texas. Additional fishermen already have lost their lives to the sea in 2005 as well..." and: "Commercial fishing is among the most hazardous occupations in the United States, with the winter months proving to be the most deadly".

Further, Mr Hogarth calls on skippers to 'properly equip their vessels with emergency gear, stay in port or sail back home when NOAA broadcasts weather warnings, to make sure the vessel is stable also in heavy winds, large waves, or forces caused by fishing gear and able to counter external forces to maintain an upright position, and not be led by lost fishing opportunities and revenue into putting vessels and crews in harm's way.'

## It was a timely appeal

In the USA, vessels up to 200 GRT are not required to have a licensed master. Thus, with the exception of the larger Alaska crabbers, safety conditions in almost all commercial fishing vessels in the U.S. are a matter of the attitude of owners and skippers. Proposals to introduce certifications seem to be opposed by the industry. Ms Barbara Stevenson, a vessels owner of Portland, Maine, wrote on the Internet Fishfolk list: "Also when suggested, the proposals went farther than the industry was ready to go. So rather than get there one step at a time, we have not gone anywhere". Anyway, the Coast

Guard has also decided that full Coast Guard licensing of commercial fishermen and inspections of fishing vessels are off the table. Thus, the U.S. fishery has been left with the lack of standards and adequate regulations.

## New Bedford's grief

So far, this winter there were seven deaths out of an estimated 400 to 450 fishermen working from New Bedford, Mass. - a scary statistic. Ms Peggy Barry of Washington, D.C., lost her son, Peter, in 1985 aboard an uninspected vessel with no proper live-saving equipment and a cocaine-using captain. Since, she has been active in the enacting of the 1988 Commercial Fishing Industry Vessel Safety Act, and continues to call for obligatory Coast Guard inspections of all fishing vessels and safety training requirements. "Voluntary doesn't do it for me," she said.

Another item to consider is regulations that willy-nilly motivate fishermen to continue fishing in bad weather. In New England there are regulations leading fishermen to fish in bad weather and that motivate some skippers to keep fishing in unsafe conditions. The resulting financial penalties can total more than \$18,000 for boats that cut short a fishing trip without catching their allocated quota. Mayor Frederick M. Kalisz Jr. of New Bedford said that the existing rules exacerbate the dangers fishermen face at sea during the winter months, and that abolition of such rules will make the sea safer for fishermen. Mr Hogarth promised to attend to this problem and to work to remove penalties for fishermen that could pressure them to keep fishing in bad weather. Till you read this, those rules might have been abolished.

## Search and rescue

The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) provides American fishermen with a truly fine search-and-rescue service. Frequent reports tell of the many sea-going people and their vessels saved by USCG's quick response with cutters and helicopters. In addition, the USCG is offering an array of free prevention and survival training services, participation in which is voluntary.

For example, the USCG recently published the 2nd edition of a booklet entitled: *A Best Practices Guide to Vessel Stability* (undated, U.S. Coast Guard, Washington, DC. [www.uscg.mil/hq/gm/cfvs/index.shtml](http://www.uscg.mil/hq/gm/cfvs/index.shtml)). This well illustrated booklet, written in a popular style, introduces its readers to the hard facts of stability, which along with flooding and foundering have long been among the main causes of marine disasters in the American fishery, especially where crabbers carry heavy deck load, and scallopers heavy dredging equipment.

"Stability is the reason we are all here. A general lack of knowledge about how and where to load can cause boats to sink, especially when hit by a sudden wave that floods the deck," said Eric Dawicki the President of the Northeast Maritime Institute on a recent meeting on safety in fisheries.

## Certification

In most countries, or wherever required by insurance, fishing skippers need to be certified, as for example, in the UK, where vessels over 16.5m must have a certified skipper, and with over 1,000 hp - a certified engineer.

Nothing guarantees safety. Still, certification as an addition to marine wisdom and experience helps. Because a fisherman who has passed well-designed examinations is equipped with all the theoretical and some practical knowledge one needs to take the vessel and the people out to the ocean and bring them safely back. No doubt, there are old fishermen who've got all this knowledge and plenty of experience, without passing such examinations - provided that they keep up to date with new info and technology. But, there's no reason why younger people with ambitions to skipper a fishing vessel should not be obliged to go for training and examinations.

Maybe the American authorities and the fishing industry should have a look at how Iceland, Norway and other countries, whose fishermen are braving the rough North Atlantic environment, are dealing with safety at sea and the related prevention and regulation.