

NIOSH Evaluation of the USCG Alternate Compliance and Safety Agreement

It's been almost ten years since the world learned about crab fishing and Alaska's "Deadliest Catch." But before the spotlight fell on shellfish, there was another Alaskan fleet that drew the attention of fishing safety experts and the general public: the Head and Gut (H&G) Fleet. The H&G Fleet is composed of freezer longliners and freezer trawlers that catch a variety of bottom-fish and process them onboard into many different products. H&G boats operate year-round and fish primarily in the Bering Sea.

During 2001-2002 the H&G fleet suffered two major vessel disasters: the capsizing and sinking of the Arctic Rose with 15 worker fatalities, and the explosion and sinking of the Galaxy with 3 worker fatalities. These two vessel disasters in the H&G fleet within such a short time period prompted the Coast Guard to take action to prevent further loss of life in the fleet.

In 2004 and 2005, the Coast Guard talked to the H&G fleet to discuss vessel safety problems and options for making the fleet safer. The result of the discussions with vessel owners and operators was the Alternate Compliance and Safety Agreement (ACSA). The goal of ACSA is to stop fishing vessels from having serious problems at sea and sinking, ultimately making the fleet safer. It includes requirements for vessel stability, watertight integrity, material condition of the hull, tail shaft, rudder, and machinery, and record keeping. ACSA also includes requirements for life-saving equipment, fire-fighting equipment, emergency communications and navigation equipment, and conducting emergency drills.

When started in 2006, ACSA was described by the Coast Guard as "one of the most significant safety improvements to the North Pacific fisheries since the passage of the Commercial Fishing Industry Vessel Safety Act." ACSA seems to be a good step forward in improving safety in the fishing industry, but the program has yet to be formally evaluated. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) is preparing to conduct a scientific study to evaluate the impact of ACSA on safety among freezer longliners and freezer trawlers.

To find out whether or not ACSA has improved safety in the fishing industry, information about injuries and other safety problems will be gathered for each freezer longliner and freezer trawler before and after ACSA. Statistical analysis will be used to see if these safety problems changed over time.

The results of this analysis will show what impact ACSA has had on vessel safety among freezer longliners and freezer trawlers. If ACSA has helped to reduce safety problems in this specific fleet, it may be a good program for improving safety among other types of fishing vessels too. The NIOSH study is starting now and will be finished by the end of 2013. The results will then be shared with the fishing industry through a variety of sources, including this newsletter.