



## **MARINE SAFETY ALERT**

### ***Inspections and Compliance Directorate***

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Washington, DC

Safety Alert 07-03

### **WINTER FISHING IN ALASKAN WATERS**

The following information was initially developed for Alaskan area fishing industry personnel. However, the article presents important issues useful to fishermen and mariners operating in other localities.

Winter weather conditions in the S.E. panhandle region of Alaska are often less than desirable and suffer from the blunt force of Pacific storms from September to April.

Commercial fishermen working on decks of vessels should beware during these inclement weather periods. Commercial fishing is dangerous during any time of the year, but it becomes especially so during the stormy winter weather that effects this area. Working in rough seas coupled with low light conditions requires extra cautions. Commercial fishermen work in one of the most dangerous occupations in America. Each crewman must attend to his own safety and attempt to perform his work in a safe manner using all safeguards available.

The vessel's Skipper is ultimately responsible for its safe operation. Maintaining the vessel's safety equipment and assuring the safety of those onboard must be his or her primary role.

The Commercial Fishing Vessel Safety Act (CFIVSA) of 1988 provides regulations that when complied with significantly improve commercial fishing vessel safety. CFIVSA mandates safety equipment to be on board that could save a crew on a sinking fishing vessel. In Alaska where the water is cold all year, an immersion suit is required for every person on board. Depending on the vessel's route and in some cases its size, this equipment may include survival craft (rafts), Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRBs), fire fighting equipment, distress signals, and requirements for documented F/Vs that fish beyond boundary line to have crew training on emergency procedures.

Most fishing vessel accidents are the result of human error although many casualties are the result of bad weather and equipment failure. It is the skipper's job to establish emergency plans and assign stations for the crew in the event of an emergency. Statistics indicate poor response by fishing vessel crews contribute a great deal to marine casualties. This lends support to requirements mandating "Drills Training" by F/V crews. Statistics also reflect a high rate of man overboard fatalities. Drills rehearsing man overboard scenarios should be routinely conducted.

Currently there are no requirements that mandate fishermen to wear personal flotation devices (PFDs) on deck. Fishermen have long balked at wearing the old style Type I, II, or III "life jackets" complaining that life jackets are too bulky and just plain uncomfortable. Some have argued that life jackets are unsafe and limit a crewmember's maneuverability on deck.

Several companies have developed PFDs more suitable for persons working on deck on commercial fishing and other vessels. One type is a lightweight jacket or vest with CO2 inflation system, another is a suspender harness that may be worn over deck clothing and attach to rain bibs/pants. There are even traditional raincoats with inflatable buoyancy. Both of these type of PFDs have rip cord inflation systems that may be manually activated once in the water. These new devices are stream lined and do not interfere with your activity and mobility while working on deck. The jacket systems also have back up manual inflation tubes.

**Your odds of survival in cold water without a floatation device are poor.**

Hypothermia has a way of shutting down the body's ability to tread water.

The Coast Guard continues to offer courtesy dockside exams for commercial fishing vessels. The exams assist commercial fishing vessel owners in discovering what safety equipment is needed without incurring penalties. The exams can save vessel owners/skippers time and money once the season has started. If you operate in Alaskan areas and have questions or wish to schedule a dockside exam please contact Larry Snyder at Marine Safety Office Juneau (907)463-2448, Tim Clepper at Marine Safety Detachment (MSD) Ketchikan (907) 225-4496, or Ken Boyer at MSD Sitka (907)966-5454.

For additional commercial fishing vessel information, including contacts to schedule a courtesy dockside exam in other operating areas, please access the USCG Office of Compliance website at <http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-m/cfvs/index.htm>.

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