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Lesson Learned From The Sinking Of The Fishing Vessel *Katmai*

November 26, 2008

October 22, 2008 the 93' commercial fishing vessel *Katmai* was lost in the waters off of the Aleutian Islands with the loss of seven of the eleven crew. While the Coast Guard has not completed their accident review one fact is beyond dispute. Newer life rafts are better at saving lives than older rafts. The design and construction of life rafts has improved dramatically, starting in the late 1980's. Stability was improved with the development of larger, faster filling ballast pockets. The other major innovation was the "boarding ramp" or "boarding platform" which allows people in the water to enter the raft with much less effort.

In the United States there is no regulation that states a life raft must be replaced after a specific number of years. Life rafts are only removed from service when they do not pass the service criterion set forth by the raft manufacturer and the Coast Guard. Depending on the brand of raft and where your vessel operates you might find rafts over 20 years old still in service.

Life rafts can broadly be put into two categories, USCG approved and non-approved. For USCG approved life rafts used in an offshore environment they will carry approval numbers of 160.051 or a dual approval of 160.051/160.151. The rafts with the dual approval (160.051/160.151) have the better ballast pockets and a platform or ramp to aid in boarding. After reading the testimony from the survivors of the *Katmai*, it is our suggestion that all USCG approved rafts that only carry the 160.051 approval be replaced with a modern raft.

For recreational boats that are not carrying USGC approved life rafts it is much more difficult to ascertain what is really inside your soft valise or hard container. There are no USCG approval numbers to guide you and specifications can change without the manufacturer changing the model number. Our advice is to view your life raft the next time it is being serviced and talk with the technicians about how adequate it is and what features are available on newer rafts.

Nobody wants to spend the money to purchase a new life raft. After all it is something none of us ever want to use. However there are at least two of the crew from the *Katmai* who might be alive today had they been in a new raft with better features. We must ask ourselves, how much is our life worth?

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revised 11/08