



Persons Overboard/Sunk Vessels: Fishing Jobs Continue to Take Deadly Toll

Jobs in commercial fishing have consistently ranked among the most deadly. In 19th century Gloucester, Massachusetts, for example, the town lost each year about 200 fishers, 4 percent of its population, to the sea. Although fishing, like almost all other occupations, is considerably less dangerous today than in the past, it is still the single most deadly occupation according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI).

Fishers face a risk of death on the job that is 20 to 30 times greater than any other single occupation. Between 1992 and 1996 (the latest year for which data are available), between 50 and 100 fishing deaths occurred each year. This translates into 140 deaths per 100,000 workers engaged in the occupation over the period. For occupations as a whole over the same period, the fatality rate was 5 per 100,000.

Vessel casualties

Fishing boats often travel great distances from home ports in search of their quarry, and far from safety. In the open seas, storms can have incredible destructive power that can easily send a typical fishing boat to the bottom. Ocean storms have been known to produce waves over 100 feet high—the dreaded “rogue wave.” But other perils can also sink or capsize a vessel: striking an underwater object, a rock for example, or colliding with another vessel in the fog, can have the same result.

Vessel casualties were the leading cause of fishing deaths, often involving multiple fatalities, from 1992 through 1996. Half of fishing deaths, 197, involved sinking, capsizing, collisions, explosions, and fires (see chart).

Person overboard

Rogue waves aren't the only forces capable of pulling a fisher into the sea. Lesser waves may do the same thing. Going overboard also can be a consequence of tripping over or being caught in fishing gear. Or, slipping on a wet or icy deck can have similar consequences, or being pulled overboard by a hook caught in one's clothing, or having a fishing line wrap around one's legs are all examples of incidents classified as “falls from ship or boat.” These falls—almost a fifth of all fisher fatalities—accounted for 70 deaths during the 1992-96 period.

Diving and other fatalities

Sometimes crew members are called upon to untangle nets or lines snagged on the ocean floor or in ships' propellers. Even experienced, certified divers hired to go after sea cucumbers and other sea life face hazards such as poor weather conditions, murky water, unexpected underwater currents,

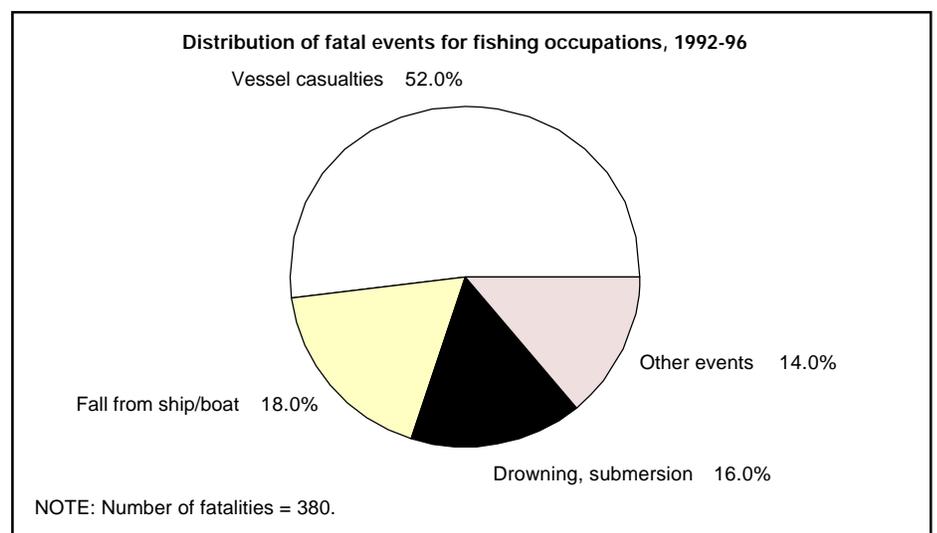
snagged air lines, equipment malfunction, decompression problems, and dangerous marine life.

Drownings accounted for a sixth of the recorded fishing deaths between 1992-96. Most of these were diving related.

Other hazards related to the fishing industry, however, tend to be more typical of the workplace generally. These include electrocutions, being caught in winches and other machinery, homicides, and aircraft crashes. Deaths resulting from these causes accounted for the remaining fishing fatalities.

Other considerations

Fishing in cold waters is inherently riskier because of hypothermia. Fishers who go overboard into extremely cold water are at risk of hypothermia, as well, and can only last 6 to 7 minutes immersed before dying. Alaska, with one of the Nation's smallest workforces, accounted for the largest number (112) of fishing deaths in 1992-96 (see table).



In Alaska, harvesting most commercial crab species takes place during the winter when air and sea temperatures are at their lowest; high winds, snow, sleet, ice, and high seas are common and daylight hours shorter.

Other cold-water States, such as Maine, Massachusetts, Oregon, and Washington, also had disproportionately high numbers of fishing deaths.

The kind of marine life fishers go after also

plays a major role in fishing fatalities. For example, shellfishers are more at risk of dying on the job than are finfishers. During 1992-96, shellfishing with 160 fatalities, accounted for one-third more deaths than finfishing with 119 fatalities. These figures are even more startling because the shellfishing industry employed just three-fifths as many workers as the finfishing industry, and the weight of the shellfish catch was less than one-sixth that for finfish.

Additional information

This report was adapted from "Fishing for a Living is Dangerous Work," *Compensation and Working Conditions*, Summer 1998. For additional information, contact Dino Drudi, (202) 606-6175, e-mail: Drudi_D@bls.gov

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Fishing occupation¹ fatalities by State, 1992-96

State	Number	Percent
Total	380	100
Alaska	112	29
Massachusetts	32	8
Texas	31	8
Florida	26	7
Oregon	21	6
California	21	6
Washington	20	5
Louisiana	18	5
North Carolina	18	5
Maine	17	4
Hawaii	14	4
Other ²	50	13

¹Includes fishers, captains, and other fishing vessel officers.

²These 50 fishing fatalities are distributed over the remaining 30 States and the District of Columbia.

They also include 7 fatalities occurring outside any States territorial waters. None of these States accounted for more than 5 fishing fatalities.