

Staying In One Piece is Worth a Little Paperwork



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Most commercial fishermen I've known generally hated paperwork, and would rather be out on the water. Even so, all have wanted to arrive back home safely with their catches, and for that, paperwork might be a small price to pay.

Too many fishing accidents seem to happen when skippers and crews either don't have enough knowledge or don't take necessary preventive measures. One way to avoid situations like those is to use checklists (I've written here before about how they help minimize your risk).

Now I want to raise a related subject - the safety audit. Most BC fishing vessels don't have formal safety programs, but still get by if a skipper knows the boat and has a steady, experienced crew. However, this isn't the case as often as it should be, judging from the safety record of your inherently dangerous industry.

That brings us to paperwork and why it's worth considering a successful commercial fishing safety approach applied "Down Under." The safety audit is the basis for the safe vessel management plan required in New Zealand. Owners there must develop onboard operations manuals for their vessels, defining practices and procedures for safe vessel and fishing operations.

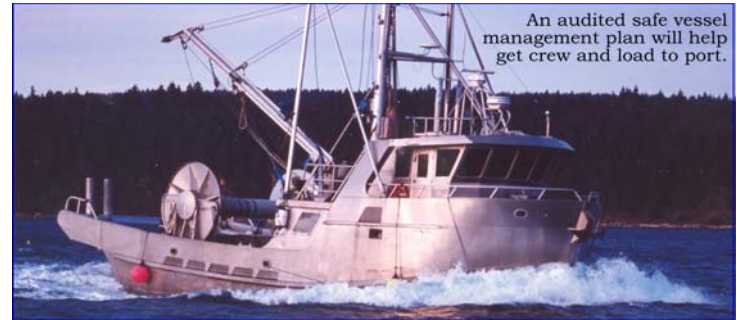
Typically, this audit process involves information on the vessel's construction and stability, equipment and vessel operating limits, crew training and qualifications, vessel maintenance, safe work practices and emergency procedures. You'll also see plans that include:

- Designating one crewmember as safety coordinator on vessels with larger crews.
- Listing appropriate first aid supplies and having someone aboard who knows how to use them.
- Ensuring each crewmember understands the collision regulations and the buoy system.
- Seeing that personal protective equipment is worn and maintained, and that crewmembers are trained in its use.
- Conducting periodic safety inspections to identify and correct deficiencies.
- Insurers' requirements and regulations of Transport Canada and WorkSafeBC.

This approach is business as usual in many BC industries, where even small firms periodically audit their safety programs, identify problems and apply remedies to prevent injuries. For a commercial fishing vessel, this could mean writing a baseline safety plan that you would review or audit once a year, possibly less often depending on the fishery. You can find an online sample at

<http://www.sito.co.nz/doclibrary/public/resources/SafetyVesselResource.pdf>.

Don't worry about the word-for-word quotation of New Zealand maritime laws, but check the plain-English guide to translating them into practical onboard safety plans and audits.



Fishing vessel safety audits needn't be formal, cumbersome or expensive. For instance, fishing organizations could run an audit process for their members, or owner-operated vessels could create a buddy system where skippers or owners review one another's safety systems (companies with fleets should already have qualified people conducting audits).

It's true that skippers and crews are competitors, but you're also your brother's keeper, because there are always risks whenever the lines are let go and you head out to sea. Everyone shares an undeniable interest in ensuring that fishing is a safe and healthy way to earn a living. This goal is definitely worth pursuing — and so much more likely to be reached with a little paperwork for vessel management plans followed by safety audits.

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