in focus safety

RISK ASSESSMENT

Five steps to improve your odds of safe fishing

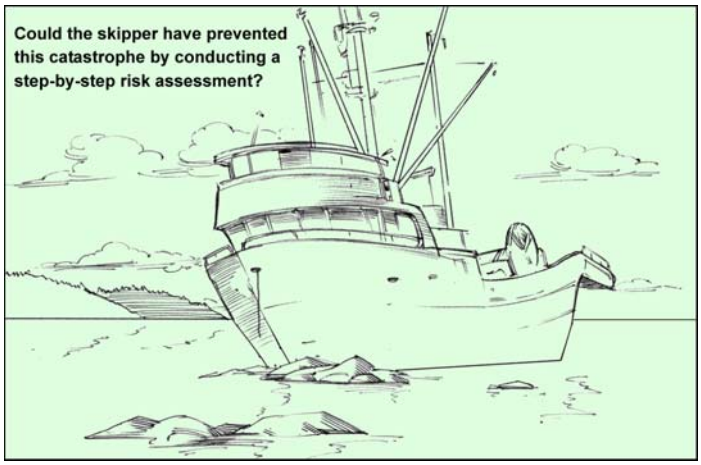
BY HARVEY LINTON for WorkSafeBC

A long lay-up ends, and you rush to get out fishing again. While pulling in the bowline you notice that the anchor line is rusty, with fraying on some strands. "Oh well," you think, "it should hold 'til we're back."

Later, bone-tired after fishing 'round the clock for days, you drop anchor in an open bay and crawl into the bunk. The sound of gusting wind rouses you, but only briefly. The next time you wake, the boat is listing and banging against something. You charge on deck and find your vessel pounding against some rocks and taking on water. As you dash to the pilothouse to send a distress call, you see the broken anchor line. Your initial thought, before sailing was an incredibly bad gamble.

Commercial fishermen make decisions like that regularly, and not just with anchor lines. It could be about the rigging, boom and lines taking a big lift. It might be the auxiliary pumping system "lasting until we get back" and more. Every decision has potential costs and benefits.

But there's no need to roll the dice. Instead, here's a step-by-step approach to conducting a risk assessment to identify potential hazards and the degree of risk. You do the rating based on your knowledge and experience.



A. **Estimate frequency:** How often might a specific risk cause an accident?

1. **Remote** – a once-in-a-lifetime event;
2. **Occasional** – possible every five to 10 years;
3. **Likely** – every one to five years; or
4. **Probable** – at least yearly.

B. **Rate the consequences:** How badly could an accident affect you?

1. **Minor** – potential injury needing little more than first aid;
2. **Major** – serious injuries requiring medical attention; major vessel damage; or
3. **Catastrophic** – loss of life and loss of vessel.

C. **Develop and rate your planned preventive actions:** Steps A and B define the risk for which you need to devise countermeasures and rate their likely benefits.

1. **None** – frequency or risk consequences remain unchanged or only slightly changed;
2. **Low** – frequency or consequence rating is ~ 20% to 50% reduced;
3. **Medium** – frequency or consequence rating is ~ 50% to 75% reduced; or
4. **High** – frequency or consequence rating reduced by 100%.

D. **Estimate costs:** This is when you assess what's needed to implement your planned preventive actions.

1. **None** – you only change how a couple of minor things are done;
2. **Low** – you change how some things are done, and this involves crew instruction or training;
3. **Medium** – equipment change or refitting; or
4. **High** – large capital investment.

E. **Assess benefits relative to costs:** For each planned action, divide the rating in Step C by the rating in Step D. The higher the result, the better. Think back to the worn anchor line that started this column. Replacing it would mean a Step C rating of 4, and a Step D rating of 3. This has a benefit-to-cost ratio of 1.33 — well worth doing.

This five-step process is a simple, effective way to compare benefits to costs. It's an aid to decision-making, not a replacement for your skill and experience in fishing operations and vessel handling. I hope you find it a useful way to reduce the risks of commercial fishing and improve your odds of making it a safe and successful way to earn a living.

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