

The REALITY, Not The FAIRY TALE, About Safe Fish Packing



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for WorkSafeBC

Once upon a time, many fishermen – using troll, seine, longline, trap and other gear types – believed crews on the packers had soft jobs. This was, and is, a fairy tale.

Packing can be risky business, with more than its share of injuries and fatalities. For example, both herring reduction and roe fisheries have seen cases like the loaded packer that went down with a loss of life south of Denman Island several years ago.

Similar to coastal freighters in many ways, fish packers generally move their cargos to and from the fishing grounds. But packer crews can face hazardous fatigue because of working long hours to rush fish and other seafood to processing plants. Packers also transport supplies to coastal fish camps, and may tow fish camps, scows, skiffs and fishing vessels. Often, local knowledge and navigation skills are crucial.

Handling loads can involve, among other things, setting up and pumping fish, transferring cargo by conveyor and slinging and hoisting cargo. To varying degrees, packer crewmembers must be able to use winches, hoisting equipment, brailers, conveyors, pumps, towing gear and so on, and all this equipment must be maintained so each type is capable of safely handling the loads likely to be imposed on it.

As with fishermen, it is imperative that packer crews have safe procedures and training, and follow them. A key safety issue for packers is vessel stability when traveling light, in some loading conditions and when towing. Towing a scow, fish camp or fishing vessel can affect stability and crew safety in many ways, and must be done correctly and cautiously.

Remember that towing affects every boat's reactions to wind and waves, and problems mount in bad weather. Beware of shock loads caused by running in a seaway, sudden changes of speed and sharp turns.



Using sufficient towline is essential. The shorter the towline, the greater the strain. The longer the towline, the more it sinks and absorbs shock, particularly in moderate to rough seas. One good towing practice is to use at least 100 feet of towline, even on a calm sea. Of course, that would likely be shortened in a busy, narrow channel, before anchoring or tying up to a buoy, dock or float.

Both the towing vessel and the one in tow need to have adequate stability and buoyancy. Before taking a vessel or scow in tow, ensure that it has:

- Watertight integrity; that is, be unlikely to sink suddenly;
- Heavy objects and moveable cargo secured;
- Bilges pumped, and free-surface potential minimized;
- Steps taken to lower its center of gravity;
- Deck not awash, and stern above water; and
- The towline is leading over its stern, not over the side.

Preventing packer crew injuries takes planning, skill, training and good vessel management. It's well worth the investment. Everyone wins when barges, camps and equipment reach their destinations safely, and loads of seafood get to processing plants without incident. Those can be the biggest payoffs of the season.

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