

Vessel Safety Workshop Brings Competent Familiarity to Panic Situations

by Tony Corey

Fishing vessel accidents come with the territory for the country's most dangerous occupation. Equipment failure, fire, capsizing, even fickle weather are routine workday threats to commercial fishermen.

Those threats hit close to home last winter as commercial fishing catastrophes claimed the lives of a number of local fishermen. A harsh and undeniable reminder of the need for diligent attention to safety, the tragedies have reactivated a Rhode Island Sea Grant vessel safety program intended to prepare fishermen for some of the perils their profession invites.

"I've had a few close calls. I'm sure we all have," says Paul Roussell, a veteran deckhand working out of Newport. "This is my first time [participating in safety drills] in the water, so this course was excellent practice."

Roussell, along with about 50 fishermen, agency officials, and others whose business takes them aboard fishing vessels, is winding up a full day of classroom and shipboard exercises developed to reinforce general safety guidelines and survival procedures. Under the tutelage of Rhode Island Sea Grant fisheries extension staff, he is exploring the practical significance of safety factors ranging from the obvious—life rafts and immersion suits—to the unexpected—pocket mirrors and zipper wax.

What becomes clear during these exercises is the fact that safety requires adherence to the spirit as well as the letter of precautionary practices: Even though fishermen may invest in recommended safety equipment, they acknowledge that they don't necessarily know how to use it.

A drill using immersion suits offers fairly convincing testimony to this fact.

Regarded as standard equipment on many fishing boats, these life-saving outfits provide buoyancy and insulation against cold ocean waters. But, observes Russ Wallis, president of the Rhode Island Fishermen's Association, if a suit has been packed away for a while, unused and unwaxed, "the zipper can stick and you're not going to get it zipped up."

A fisherman can't be fighting with a snagged zipper when his vessel is taking on water. "It takes time to get into a survival suit," notes Vincent Manfredi,



Richard Wing uses a model to demonstrate vessel stability.

fisheries technician with the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries ([MDMF](#)). “A boat can sink in less time.”

Something Manfredi and fellow participants learn during the workshop, though, shifts the odds back in the fisherman’s favor—with plastic bags slipped over his shoes, a fisherman can get into his survival suit in less than a minute.

Safety for Its Own Sake

Vessel safety training has been a linchpin of Rhode Island Sea Grant’s decades-long commitment to safety at sea through recurring periods of change and adjustment in the fishing industry. Since the 1980s, Sea Grant–sponsored safety and survival workshops have helped the industry weather challenges ranging from an insurance availability crisis to mandated drill training for fishing boat captains.

To extend the reach of its workshops and demonstrations, Rhode Island Sea Grant has developed a broad range of supporting materials: the Northeast fishing vessel safety curriculum, the *Atlantic Coast Fishing Vessel Safety Manual*, a drill training manual, a video demonstrating air-sea rescue techniques, and numerous fact sheets, written in English and Portuguese, explaining fishing vessel safety regulations. Eventually expanding the safety training initiative by enlisting Sea Grant programs throughout the Northeast, Rhode Island Sea Grant has contributed to the training of more than 3,000 fishermen and 150 drill instructors in workshops along the East Coast.

In recent years, Sea Grant has scaled back its aggressive safety training effort, prompted by diminishing need and the entry of commercial businesses into drill training instruction, according to Kathleen Castro, Sea Grant [Sustainable Fisheries Extension Program](#) director and coordinator of the vessel safety program.

But the cluster of tragedies affecting the Point Judith, R.I., fleet brings safety issues front and center once again, and Sea Grant responds with a resource that has already helped save lives. This time, it isn’t about insurance incentives or certification requirements. This time, it’s about safety for its own sake.

“This was a very special action for us,” says Castro. “We lost a lot of fishermen last year, many that we knew.”



Workshop participants get a thorough look at an inflated life raft, discovering features such as signaling mirrors and compartments where rainwater collects.

Even without the personal connections, the losses “made it clear there was a need to revisit the safety issue,” adds David Beutel, Sustainable Fisheries Program research associate and a workshop instructor. “Our object is to save people, so we responded to the need for better knowledge of safety practices by running this workshop.”

The workshop covers the big-ticket issues of vessel safety, including vessel stability, fire fighting, and

emergency communication. It also delves into matters of personal safety, with bonus tips about little details that can mean survival: Zippers kept lubricated with zipper wax ensure that immersion suits function as intended to protect against hypothermia. Whistles or mirrors packed into survival kits assure a means for signaling other vessels when high-tech communications fail.

“Dick Wing taught us a lot of little tricks like that,” says MDMF fisheries supervisor Mark Szymansky. He refers to Richard Wing, retiring URI fisheries, animal and veterinary science ([FAVS](#)) associate professor and originator of the URI vessel safety program. “This information is good for personal knowledge because if you ever get in a bad situation, you’ll have a calmer head about it.”

Calm response to emergencies is best assured by familiarity with equipment and procedures that come into play when problems develop. So, striving to bring competent familiarity to potential panic situations, Wing, Castro, and Beutel pace workshop participants through practice runs with several scary scenarios. Jumping overboard, fishermen learn first-hand that it’s one thing to have a survival suit on board; it’s quite another to wriggle into it while dressed in heavy clothes. Bobbing in the choppy currents, they discover that it’s one thing to stow a life raft on board; it’s another thing entirely to stow it properly for quick retrieval, deploy it while treading water, and climb into it without capsizing it.

“You can have all this stuff and you never use it,” comments participant David Alves, who spends a lot of time on boats as aquaculture coordinator for the R.I. Coastal Resources Management Council ([CRMC](#)). “It’s good to have experience with the equipment, so if the time comes, you’ll have enough familiarity to know what to do.”

—*Tony Corey is a Communicator for Rhode Island Sea Grant.*

Photos in this article by Barbara Somers and Laura Skrobe, FAVS; and David Alves, CRMC.