

THE NORTH PACIFIC FISHING VESSEL OWNERS' ASSOCIATION
(NPFVOA) VESSEL SAFETY PROGRAM

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North Pacific Fishing Vessel Owners' Association (NPFVOA) Vessel Safety
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The North Pacific Fishing Vessel Owners' Association (NPFVOA) Vessel Safety Program, a non-profit organization totally dedicated to safety education and training, was developed in cooperation with the U.S. Coast Guard in 1985. Twenty-five years later, NPFVOA's Program is internationally recognized. NPFVOA, regarded as the model safety training program for the commercial fishing industry in the U.S., offers hands-on safety training and addresses Coast Guard regulations, as well as a multitude of other safety concerns for the fishing industry and other maritime operators. NPFVOA continues to evolve and serve the dynamic needs of the men and women engaged in what is considered to be the most dangerous occupation in the country.

Background

The success of the program is a tribute to the commercial fishermen who developed the program and continue to use it. The story of how this grassroots effort has evolved over a 25-year period is one of great success arising from an industry and government partnership. NPFVOA is a clear example of an industry sector initiating a common-sense approach to solving its safety problems. By the mid-1980's the commercial fishing industry was widely recognized for its high casualty rate. Faced with the prospect of controls designed and enforced by government, which might "not fit" or be weakened or stalled by the government regulatory process, as well as concerns about the cost and availability of insurance, the NPFVOA developed a voluntary safety training program, the Vessel Safety Program.

Important to the development of the safety program was the incorporation of "lessons learned" from veteran North Pacific fishermen and collaboration with government. Recognizing the importance of vessel safety standards and crew safety awareness and training, but lacking the authority to regulate the commercial fishing industry, the Coast Guard was also beginning to develop a unique voluntary safety program in 1984. When the Coast Guard learned that the NPFVOA had already embarked upon a safety program for its fishermen, it joined efforts in 1985. This union produced a set of comprehensive "voluntary" standards aimed at vessel safety and personnel/operational safety awareness and education. Neither organization wanted to wait any longer to establish acceptable safety practices to improve the poor safety record and impact the availability of insurance. Both NPFVOA and the Coast Guard shared the philosophy that legislating safety in the fishing industry took the responsibility away from the fishermen. Both organizations believed it takes commitment from the captain and crew to keep things operating in a safe condition. Both also desired a program that would appeal to the sensibilities of fishermen, who were waking up to the senselessness of many of the tragic losses.

The Vessel Safety Program

The NPFVOA Vessel Safety Program is unique because it is entirely self-supporting through member dues, course tuition and sales of educational materials. It is governed by a Board of Directors, and an Executive Director and staff plan and manage day-to-day operations. Vital to NPFVOA's success is its membership base which spans the full range of industry – from the single-operator fishing boats to the largest processing ships with crews of 150 or more – as well as support businesses and individuals. Training courses and educational materials are available to members and non-members alike; however, members enjoy reduced rates. A diverse membership base provides a means for direct communication with industry. This facilitates early identification of safety issues and concerns, as well as a means for broad and rapid dissemination of safety information.

NPFVOA's central location has made it easily accessible to many who seek safety information and training. The Seattle-based fleet accounts for approximately eighty percent of Alaska's seafood landings, which equates to about half of the nation's harvest. Situated in Fishermen's Terminal in Seattle, NPFVOA is surrounded by more than 700 commercial fishing vessels moored in this working port.

The Three Primary Components of the NPFVOA Vessel Safety Program

Vessel Safety Manual The Vessel Safety Manual, originally prepared in conjunction with the U.S. Coast Guard, was first published in 1986. It has been updated by NPFVOA five times since then, with significant revisions following the Fishing Vessel Safety Act of 1988, subsequent regulations and Coast Guard interpretations; the most recent edition was published in 2004. The Manual, regarded as the operational standard for the commercial fishing industry, provides useful and practical measures which address a wide range of problems facing the mariner under normal and emergency situations.

The Vessel Safety Manual is based in large part on the experience of those who have fished in the Bering Sea and North Pacific Ocean. It is not a set of legal documents, nor is it intended to be a rigid set of standards. Each vessel owner and captain should adopt his own safety practices based upon the specific characteristics of his/her vessel and gear type, the season and area of operation, as well as the experience of the crew. The Manual is designed to be used as a reference guide to help captains and crews establish the safety practices to be used aboard their vessel.

Videotape/DVD Safety and Survival at Sea Series The Safety and Survival at Sea videotapes/DVDs are designed to complement hands-on training classes for: Medical Emergencies at Sea; Safety Equipment and Survival Procedures; Fire Prevention and Control; and Fishing Vessel Stability. All but Stability are available in Spanish.

Crew Safety Training Attendance in NPFVOA's numerous U.S. Coast Guard-approved safety training classes has exceeded 37,500. All courses are designed to be portable. Since 1985, NPFVOA has provided training from St. Paul, AK to Hawaii on the West Coast, as well as New Bedford, MA and the Coast Guard Reserve Training Center in Yorktown, VA.

Using hands-on practice to dramatize and enliven the information presented in the manual and videos, the Crew Safety Training Program offers both shipboard and classroom exercises. The primary philosophy of the NPFVOA Vessel Safety Program is “Be prepared. Commercial fishing is inherently dangerous.” There are no ways to remove all the hazards of the sea, nor can human error be entirely eliminated; however, the dangers can be magnified or minimized by the actions of a vessel’s skipper and/or crew. No one is ever 100 percent ready, but it is the captain’s responsibility to ensure that the vessel and crew are as prepared as possible for the ever-present possibility of an accident or emergency.

The NPFVOA Vessel Safety Program’s safety courses all emphasize hands-on training with instructors who are experts in their respective fields. The program initially offered five safety courses that addressed basic causes of casualties:

- Safety Equipment and Survival Procedures
- Medical Emergencies at Sea
- Fire Prevention and Control
- Vessel Stability
- Navigation: Collision Avoidance

Twenty-five years later, NPFVOA currently offers an array of Coast Guard-approved and other courses:

- STCW Basic Safety Training:
12-hour Personal Survival Techniques; 4-hour Personal Safety and Social Responsibilities; 16-hour Firefighting; and 8-hour First Aid/CPR
- 24-hour STCW Basic Safety Training Refresher Course
- 32-hour STCW Medical Care Provider
- 40-hour STCW Medical Person in Charge
- 8-hour Emergency Drill Instructor Workshop
- 8-hour Drill Instructor for Small Boat Operators
- 8-hour Onboard Drill Safety Orientation
- 16-hour Proficiency in Survival Craft - Limited
- Hazwoper – 24-hour and 8-hour Refresher
- 8-hour Shipboard Damage Control
- 4½-hour Shipboard Watertight Door and Hatch Maintenance
- 8-hour OSHA Compliance Workshop

The classes also emphasize the value of crews having hands-on practice managing emergencies in order to foster confidence to know how to respond as a “team”. Feedback from individuals who have attended the courses over 25 years attests to the value of the training program. The instruction often provides the first in-the-water experiences wearing immersion suits, and deploying/boarding/righting life rafts for many fishermen. Many owners and captains have so highly valued this training that they require refresher

training for their returning crew, or require it for new hires before taking their first trip on a fishing vessel.

As a result of conducting training over the past 25 years, NPFVOA has witnessed major cultural changes in safety practices. Crews have upgraded their lifesaving equipment, and relocated lifesaving equipment to make it more accessible, improved access and egress capabilities, and reevaluated where their immersion suits are stowed to ensure they are “readily accessible,” as required by the Coast Guard, in the event of a fire or sinking.

Future Direction of the NPFVOA Vessel Safety Program

The fact that attendance in NPFVOA’s training courses exceeds 37,500 and roughly 60% is voluntary, as opposed to simply satisfying Coast Guard requirements, speaks well for the proactive attitude of commercial fishermen in the Pacific Northwest. For the future, NPFVOA plans to build on the successes of the last 25 years and continue to expand course offerings and educational tools so the industry can continue to improve safety practices. The words of a veteran fisherman capture what NPFVOA strives to accomplish:

‘We fishermen used to have a more fatalistic attitude toward our profession. NPFVOA helped us focus our attention on the many things which could be changed on a fishing boat – from small physical items like the placards that point out safety concerns to the larger changes in attitudes and training that are a result of taking courses through NPFVOA. We learned how to think SAFETY FIRST.

NPFVOA has made a difference: lives are being saved!” Bob Desautel