United States Commercial Fishing Fatalities — Preventing the “Deadliest Catch”, 2000-2011

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1. Statement of Purpose
The fatality rate for the commercial fishing industry in Alaska has significantly declined and is most pronounced in the Bering Sea crab fleet which experienced a 60% decline during 1990-2009. This reduction was due to a tailored prevention program focusing on the stability and loading practices unique to this fleet. The purpose of this study was to identify the most hazardous fishing fleets in the US and to describe the unique hazards found in each to tailor prevention programs.

2. Methods/Approach
The NIOSH Commercial Fishing Incident Database (CFID) was used to identify all fatal injuries that occurred in the US fishing industry. Data are available to understand hazards associated with the crew, vessel and environmental conditions.

3. Results
During 2000-2011, 584 commercial fishermen died. The fleets that experienced the highest number of fatalities were the southern shrimp (77 deaths), Alaska salmon (45), Atlantic scallop (45) and the Westcoast Dungeness crab (30). The fleets with the highest annual fatality rates include the Northeast groundfish (600/100,000FTE), Atlantic scallop (425/100,000FTE), and Westcoast Dungeness crab (310/100,000FTE). Each fleet has different hazards associated with fatalities. Fatalities in the shrimp fleet are due to falls overboard and on deck injuries. Salmon fatalities are due to falls overboard and capsizing of small undecked vessels (skiffs). Scallop vessels are decked and carry larger crews. Fatalities in this fleet are due to collisions, instability and flooding. Dungeness crab fatalities are due to vessel sinkings and are associated with heavy weather and crossing river bars.

4. Conclusions
Further safety interventions should be tailored to prevent vessel losses and falls overboard for these high risk fleets. These interventions should focus on the specific hazards these fleets experience.

5. Significance and Contributions to the field
CFID is the only source of data identifying the hazards resulting in fatalities for each fishing fleet. Regional summaries have been developed for each geographic region of the country to identify the high-risk fleets and areas for prevention. Policies have been developed based on these data to lessen the hazards fishing fleets experience such as implementing more cautious procedures when crossing hazardous river bars in the Pacific Northwest.

References: