



COMMERCIAL FISHING SAFETY

The Transportation Safety Board of Canada (TSB) has long sought to improve commercial fishing safety. The TSB has been monitoring commercial fishing safety since 1999 and this issue has been on the TSB Watchlist since 2010. Every year, the same safety deficiencies on board fishing vessels continue to put at risk the lives of thousands of Canadian fish harvesters and the livelihoods of their families and communities.

The situation

Despite various initiatives that have sparked the development of a safety culture within the commercial fishing industry, the same safety deficiencies on board fishing vessels continue to put at risk the lives of thousands of Canadian fish harvesters, and affect their families and communities' well-being. Since 1992, the TSB has made 42 recommendations pertaining to fishing vessel safety, before the issue of fishing safety was added to the Watchlist in 2010. Since the issue was added to the Watchlist, the TSB has made six new recommendations. Of the 48 recommendations, 10 are active, and so their responses are reassessed periodically by the Board. At the time of publication of the Watchlist 2020, the latest reassessments of the responses to these recommendations were as follows:

- unsatisfactory: [M16-03](#)
- satisfactory intent: [M17-04](#), [M16-02](#), [M08-04](#), [M00-09](#), [M94-06](#), and [M92-07](#)
- satisfactory in part: [M99-02](#), [M16-05](#), and [M16-01](#)

In 2012, the TSB released a safety issues investigation on the causes of fatal fishing vessel accidents. The investigation highlighted a number of systemic factors requiring attention, in particular: vessel modifications and their impact on stability; the lack of, or failure to use, lifesaving equipment, such as personal flotation devices (PFDs), immersion suits and emergency signaling devices; unsafe work practices; and inadequate regulatory oversight.

Number of occurrences in Canada

From 2011 to 2019, the TSB conducted 30 commercial fishing-related investigations where recurring unsafe conditions were identified. As shown in Figure 1 below, the same period witnessed 91 fishing-related fatalities resulting from 66 fishing accidents. The two most common reasons for fatalities were falling overboard and problems with vessel stability. The use of PFDs could not be ascertained in about 77% of the fatalities. No emergency signal was received by authorities in those occurrences involving nearly half of the fatalities (44%).

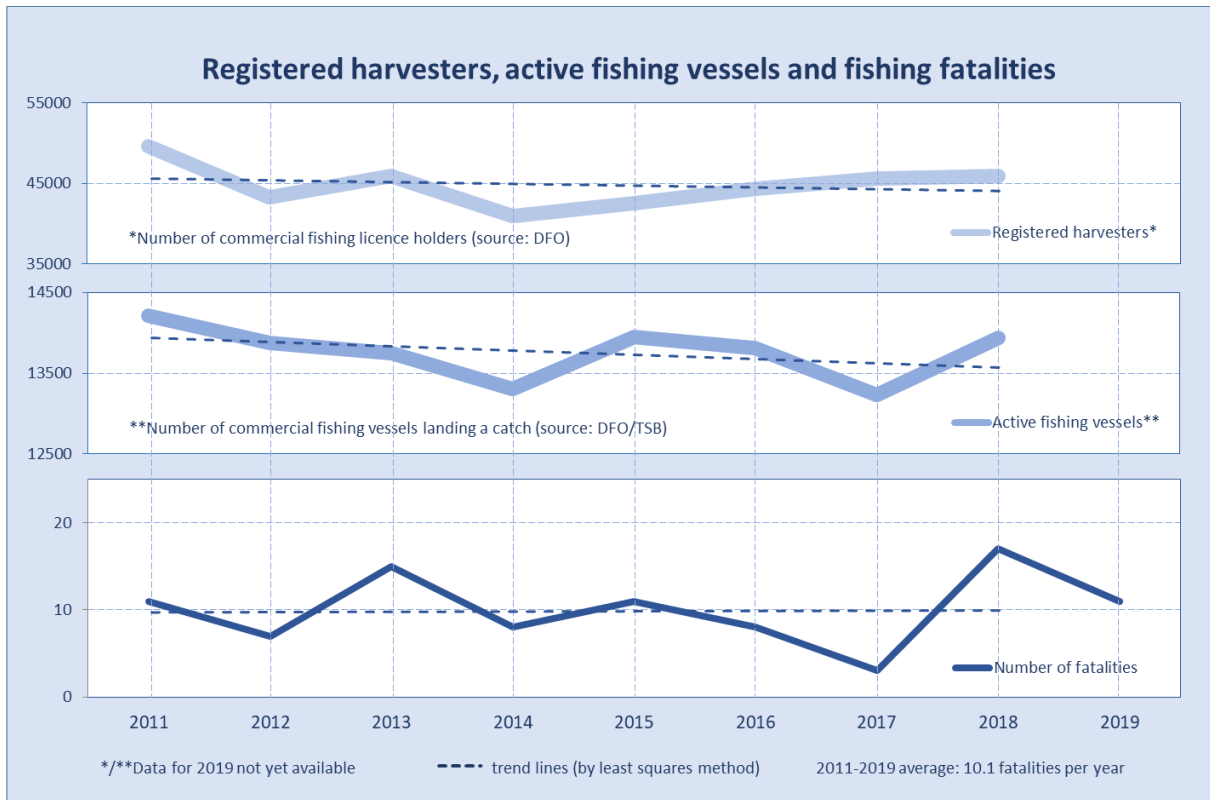
Since the publication of the 2018 TSB Watchlist, there have been an additional 28 fatalities related to commercial fishing in Canada. The number of fish harvesters that lose their lives annually has not decreased, and continues to average about 10 fatalities per year, despite a slight reduction in the number of registered fish harvesters and active fishing vessels over the same period. There are currently approximately 45 000 fish





harvesters in Canada, making harvesting marine resources one of the most hazardous occupations in the country. The vast majority, if not all, of these fatalities are preventable.

Figure 1. Number of registered fish harvesters, active fishing vessels, and fishing fatalities, 2011 to 2019, and the trends over time



The risks to harvesters, their operations, and their livelihoods

Safety deficiencies in the fishing industry put at risk the lives of fish harvesters, the efficiency and continuity of their operations, and the livelihoods of their families and communities. These risks will remain until concerted and coordinated actions by federal and provincial authorities, industry leaders and safety advocates successfully influence and reinforce changes in behaviours and attitudes.

Developing and sustaining a strong safety culture in the fishing industry is required to foster greater compliance with regulations, in particular with respect to vessel stability and the use of life-saving equipment. Addressing these two safety deficiencies would contribute to a significant reduction in the number of fishing-related fatalities given the number of deaths currently associated with falling overboard or stability/capsizing events.





Actions taken

Issues on the Watchlist are complex and difficult to solve, requiring action from many stakeholders including operators and the regulator. Even when more needs to be done, some initial steps have often been taken. These are listed here.

There have been pockets of success that vary across the country from region to region and even from harbour to harbour. For example, some fisheries have near 100% compliance with the requirement to wear a PFD while on-deck. Another example is the carriage of emergency position-Indicating radio beacons (EPIRBs), where all fishing vessels in some harbours are equipped with an EPIRB (whether it is required or not). Unfortunately, the development of a sound safety culture within the fishing industry has been inconsistent across regions and fisheries.

The new [Fishing Vessel Safety Regulations](#) have now been in place since 2017 for vessels up to 24.4 metres in length. This has initiated a number of oversight and education activities by the regulator, Transport Canada (TC), and includes developing and delivering policy documents and guidance on the application of regulations. TC has also provided the Canadian fishing industry information and opportunities to participate in consultation sessions. In addition, it has implemented a program to help owners and operators to ensure that their vessels meet applicable regulations. Overall, it appears that fish harvesters are aware of the existence of the new regulations, but not all are aware of the detailed requirements.

Leadership from industry and communities

Some fish harvester associations have taken increasing leadership in developing guidelines for vessel modifications and stability, while other associations continue to develop codes of best practices for their fisheries. Some provincial workers' compensation boards have increased education and enforcement efforts and imposed fines to encourage safe work practices. In addition, various other provincial organizations have launched education initiatives. As a result of these efforts, there are signs of behavioural change among fish harvesters, but it is inconsistent across regions and fisheries.

Actions required

The issue of commercial fishing safety will remain on the Watchlist until there are sufficient indications that a sound safety culture has taken root throughout the industry and in fishing communities across the country, namely:

- Federal and provincial authorities coordinate regulatory oversight of commercial fisheries.
- TC, provincial workplace safety authorities, and harvester associations promote existing user-friendly guidelines on vessel stability designed to reduce unsafe practices.
- Spurred by the leadership of industry and safety advocates, there is marked and widespread evidence that harvesters are taking ownership of safety, specifically with respect to the use of stability guidelines, PFDs, immersion suits, emergency signaling devices, and safe work practices.

