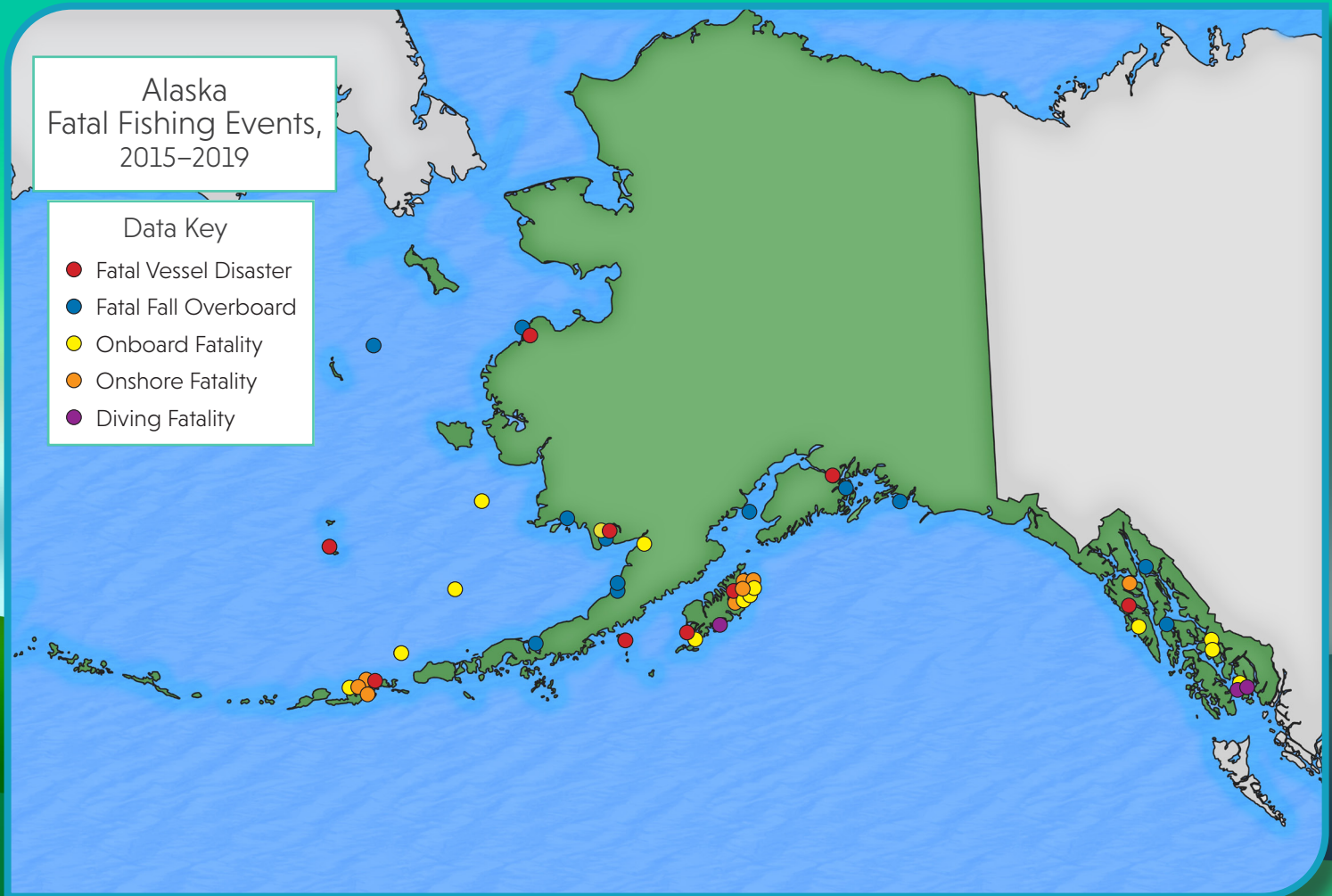


# Commercial Fishing Fatality Summary

## Alaska Region

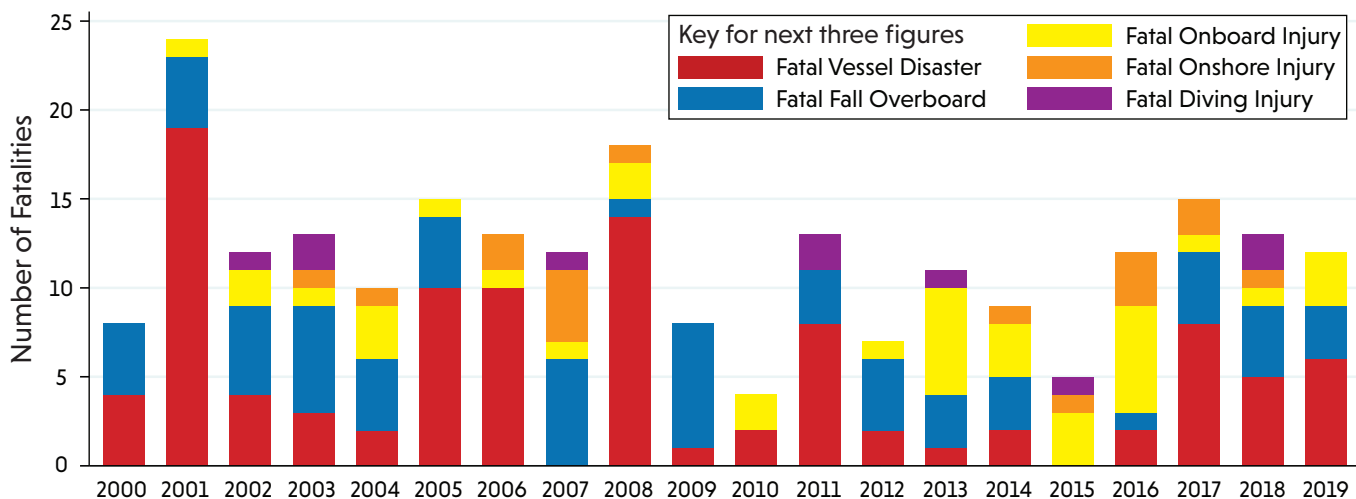


## About this Report

This report is a five-year update (2015–2019) on commercial fishing fatalities in Alaska. Two related reports were previously published on commercial fishing fatalities in Alaska during 2000–2009 and 2010–2014. They are available at [cdc.gov/niosh/fishing/data-research/regional-summaries/commercial-fishing-safety.html](https://cdc.gov/niosh/fishing/data-research/regional-summaries/commercial-fishing-safety.html) and can be used for comparison with this current report. This updated report is one in a set of four summarizing the most recent fatality and vessel disaster data for US fishing regions: Alaska, West Coast, East Coast, and the Gulf Coast.

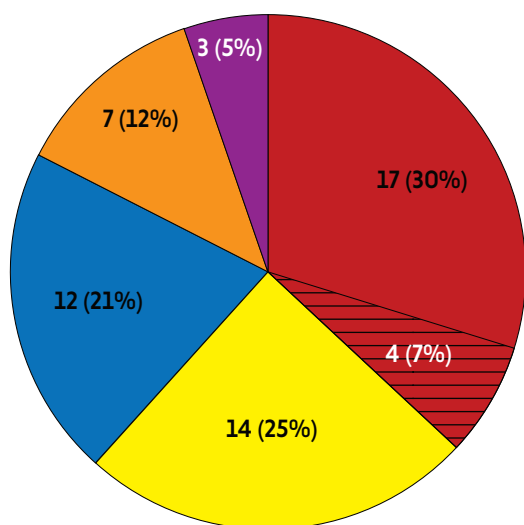
## Overview of Commercial Fishing Fatalities

**Figure 1. Commercial Fishing Fatalities by Year and Incident Type, Alaska, 2000–2019 (236 Total)<sup>1</sup>**



During the 20-year period 2000–2019, 236 deaths occurred in Alaskan fisheries, averaging 12 fatalities annually (Figure 1). For the most recent five-year period (2015–2019), 57 commercial fishing fatalities were recorded, averaging 11 fatalities annually. This is an increase over the preceding five-year period (2010–2014) (45 fatalities); however, over the full 20 year period (2000–2019), there was no overall trend (increase or decrease) in the number of fatalities.

**Figure 2. Commercial Fishing Fatalities by Incident Type, Alaska, 2015–2019\* (57 Total)<sup>1</sup>**

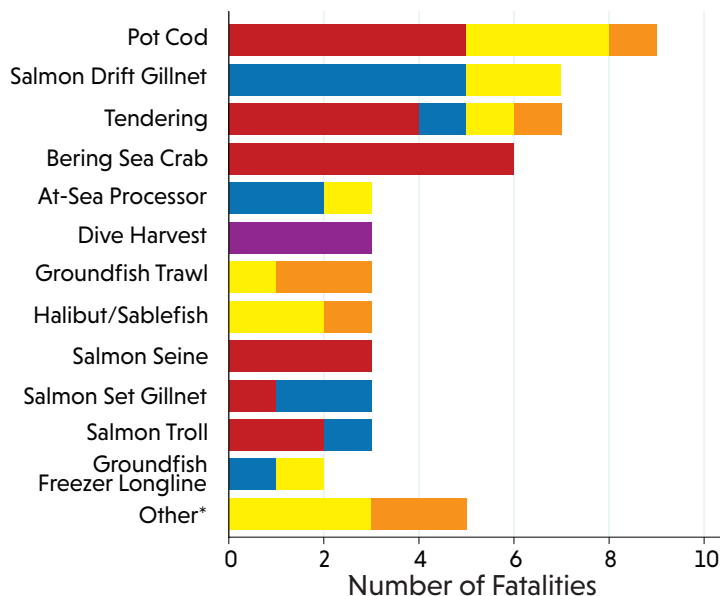


\*Note: vessel disasters involving skiffs are indicated by diagonal black lines.

Nine vessel disasters resulted in the deaths of 21 crewmembers, accounting for 37% of all deaths during 2015–2019 (Figure 2). Vessel disasters include sinkings or other events that force crews to abandon ship. During the previous five-year period, a large proportion of vessel disasters involved skiffs (22% of all fatalities with 10 deaths). While skiff-related vessel disasters decreased in the current five-year period, they continue to pose a unique hazard.

Fatalities occurring onboard vessels were the second leading cause of death during this period (14, 25%). Drowning following a fall overboard was the third leading cause of death with 12 fatalities (21%). This five-year period was the first in which fatal falls overboard were not the second leading cause of death. Less frequent were onshore fatalities, accounting for seven deaths (12%) and diving fatalities (3 deaths; 5%).

**Figure 3. Commercial Fishing Fatalities by Fleet, Alaska, 2015–2019 (57 Total)<sup>1</sup>**

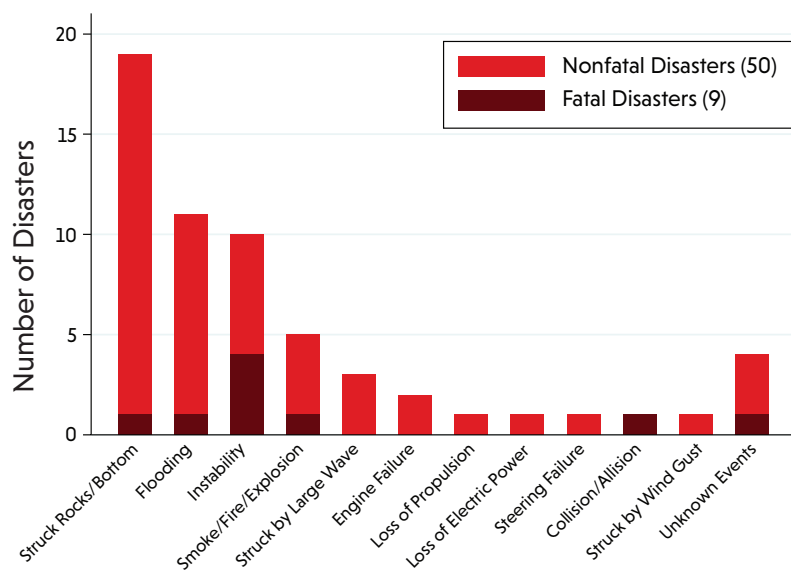


\*Other fleets are those that had a single fatality during 2015-2019: shrimp (pots), herring (seine), cod (jig), cod (longline), and groundfish freezer trawl (Amendment 80).

Twelve Alaskan fleets had at least two fatalities during 2015-2019 (Figure 3). The pot cod fleet lost nine crewmembers: five from a single vessel disaster, the capsizing and sinking of the *F/V Scandies Rose* on December 31, 2019. The salmon drift gillnet and tendering fleets experienced the second highest number of fatalities with seven deaths each. None of the fatalities in the salmon drift gillnet fleet were caused by vessel disasters. The Bering Sea crab fleet had six fatalities, all caused by the sinking of the *F/V Destination* on February 11, 2017.

## Vessel Disasters

**Figure 4. Causes of Vessel Disasters, Alaska, 2015–2019 (59 Disasters Total; 50 Nonfatal, 9 Fatal)<sup>1</sup>**



Vessel disasters resulted in the most fatalities during 2015–2019. A total of 59 vessel disasters occurred in Alaskan waters during this period (Figure 4), forcing 226 crewmembers to abandon ship and face serious risk of cold-water immersion and death. While 91% of crewmembers involved in vessel disasters survived, nine disasters resulted in 21 fatalities. The leading cause of vessel disasters was striking rocks/bottom, with 19 vessel disasters, although only one of these disasters resulted in fatalities. Of the 19 vessels that ran aground, 10 (53%) involved either an unattended helm or a crewmember asleep at the helm. Flooding was the second leading cause of vessel disasters, with 10 nonfatal disasters and one fatal disaster. The third

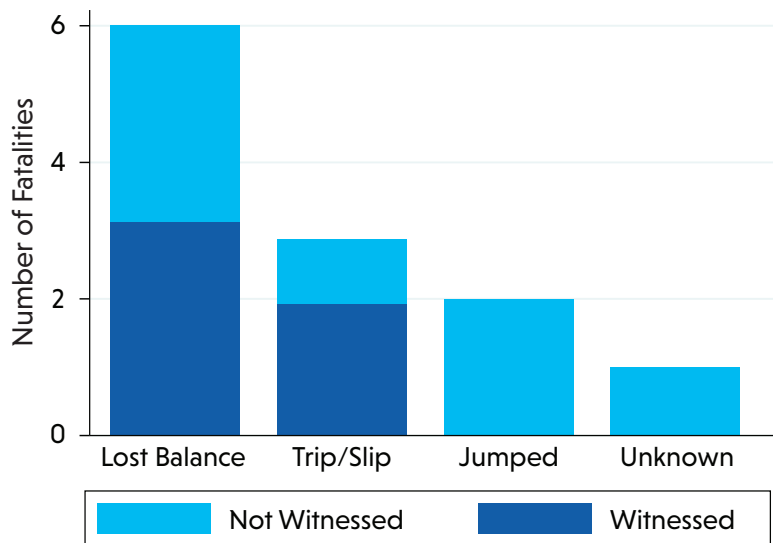
leading cause of vessel disasters was instability, which resulted in 10 vessel disasters. Four of the disasters had loss of life with a total of 14 fatalities.

The risk of cold-water immersion and drowning highlights the need to address the leading causes of vessel disasters. Two large vessel disasters during 2015-2019 resulted in 11 fatalities (half of the 21 total fatalities from vessel disasters). Both involved hazardous weather conditions, icing, instability, capsizing, and sinking in remote areas. Onboard all vessels, it is important for owners, operators, and crewmembers to ensure the vessel is loaded properly and in compliance with current stability instructions, its watertight integrity is maintained, and an alert crewmember is on watch while underway. Providing marine safety classes for all crewmembers will ensure that they learn the necessary skills to survive a vessel disaster.



# Falls Overboard

Figure 5. Causes of Fatal Falls Overboard, Alaska, 2015–2019 (12 Total)<sup>1</sup>



During 2015–2019, 12 crewmembers died from drowning after falling overboard, which was the third leading cause of death contributing to 21% of fatalities in Alaska (Figure 5). None of the crewmembers were wearing personal flotation devices (PFDs) when they drowned. Over half (58%) of the falls overboard were not witnessed by other crewmembers, primarily because those who fell overboard were alone on deck (4) or alone on the vessel (2). Falls overboard were most frequently caused by loss of balance and tripping or slipping on deck.

Drowning after falling overboard or off a dock remain persistent yet preventable

problems in the industry. All crewmembers should wear a PFD anytime they are working around water, such as working on deck, dockside, and when boarding and disembarking a vessel. A variety of PFD styles that are comfortable and do not snag are available for crewmembers.

## You Can Survive a Fall Overboard!

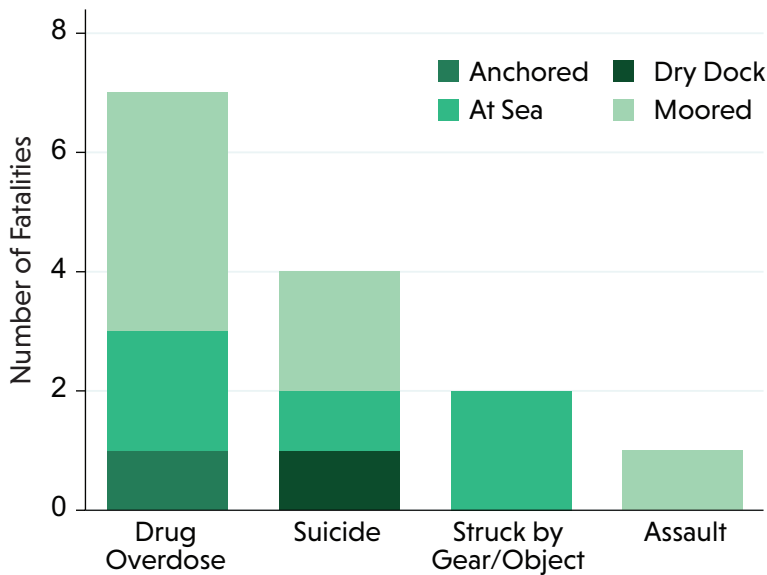
The number one thing you can do to survive a fall overboard is float. Even in cold water, a PFD buys your crew time to find you and get you back over the rail.

NIOSH has resources to help you find the PFD that works best for you.



# Onboard Fatalities

Figure 6. Causes of Fatal Onboard Injuries, Alaska, 2015–2019 (14 Total)<sup>1</sup>



During 2015–2019, 14 crewmembers died from traumatic injuries sustained onboard fishing vessels, contributing to 25% of fatalities in Alaska (Figure 6). Of these 14 fatalities, seven were due to unintentional drug overdoses and four were due to suicide. The remaining onboard fatalities involved two crewmembers being struck by gear and one homicide. Five of the 14 fatalities (36%) occurred at sea.

During 2015–2019, deaths due to drug overdoses and suicides increased substantially in frequency compared to the

previous five-year period. Vessel policies can be enacted to address this emerging issue. Vessels can carry an opioid overdose reversal kit, and crewmembers can receive training on responding to drug overdoses and other medical emergencies.

## Other Hazards



### Onshore

During 2015–2019, seven crewmembers died from traumatic injuries sustained onshore, contributing to 12% of fatalities in Alaska. All seven fatalities involved crewmembers falling off docks and drowning without PFDs while under the influence of alcohol.



### Diving

During 2015–2019, three crewmembers died from traumatic injuries sustained while diving, contributing to 5% of fatalities in Alaska. All were engaged in dive harvesting of geoducks (2 fatalities) or cucumbers (1 fatality) and died from drowning (2 fatalities) or embolism (1 fatality).

# Safety Solutions

## Vessel Disasters

- **Take a marine safety class at least every five years.** Learning how to use basic lifesaving equipment like immersion suits, life rafts, EPIRBs\*, and fire extinguishers improves chances of survival in an emergency.
- **Conduct monthly drills for abandon ship, fire, and flooding.** Drills reinforce the practical knowledge and skills learned in safety training.
- **Ensure watertight integrity of the vessel.** Inspect and maintain the hull and through-hull penetrations regularly. Maintain and test high water alarms and pumps before each trip. Check that doors and hatches are closed in rough seas.
- **Maintain proper watch.** Create fatigue management policies and use watch alarms to prevent groundings and collisions.
- **Take a vessel stability class and adhere to stability instructions.** Vessel stability training is beneficial for all crewmembers. Consult a naval architect periodically to review safe loading limits of the vessel. Always load vessels in compliance with their stability instructions.
- **Avoid crossing river bars during hazardous conditions.** If a bar crossing is unavoidable, it is important that all crewmembers don PFDs or immersion suits, and the Coast Guard should be contacted for assistance.

## Falls Overboard

- **Wear a PFD on deck and in skiffs.** PFDs keep crewmembers afloat and give the crew time for rescue, even in cold water.
- **Use a man-overboard alarm system.** Unwitnessed falls overboard delay recovery time and reduce survival. A man-overboard alarm will alert others that a fall overboard occurred, assisting in rapid search and rescue.

- **Add effective recovery devices and re-boarding ladders.** A rescue sling or similar device is more effective than a life ring for bringing a crewmember back on the vessel. If you fish alone, use an engine kill switch and make a plan to re-board your vessel without help.
- **Conduct man-overboard drills monthly.** Practice man-overboard recovery procedures regularly to ensure all crewmembers are prepared to respond to a fall overboard.

## Onboard Fatalities

- **Carry an opioid overdose reversal kit onboard.** Overdose reversal medicine is highly effective, inexpensive, and available without a prescription. Developing a substance-free policy on the vessel may also help reduce drug-and alcohol-related deaths.
- **Conduct hazard assessments on the vessel.** A hazard assessment helps identify potentially dangerous tasks and decreases the risk of injuries by correcting the hazards.
- **Take a Mental Health First Aid class.** Mental health first aid provides the skills needed to respond to mental health emergencies. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text 988 to speak with a trained crisis counselor.

## Diving Fatalities

- **Be prepared for a dive emergency.** Complete dive training and certification. Carry a bailout bottle while diving. Dive with an experienced, alert tender who is trained in diving first aid.

## Onshore Fatalities

- **Wear a PFD when working around water.** At-the-dock drownings typically occur when the individual is alone. Wearing a PFD improves survival by keeping you afloat.
- **Avoid excessive drinking.** Alcohol can impair balance and coordination, increasing the risk of a fall and impeding self-rescue.

\*Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon

<sup>1</sup>The data presented in this report come from the NIOSH Commercial Fishing Incident Database

NIOSH [2025]. Commercial Fishing Fatality Summary — Alaska Region 2015-2019. By Lucas D, Teske T, Kloczko D. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, DHHS (NIOSH) Publication No. 2025-112

### Get More Information

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