

# Commercial Fishing Fatality Summary

## West Coast Region

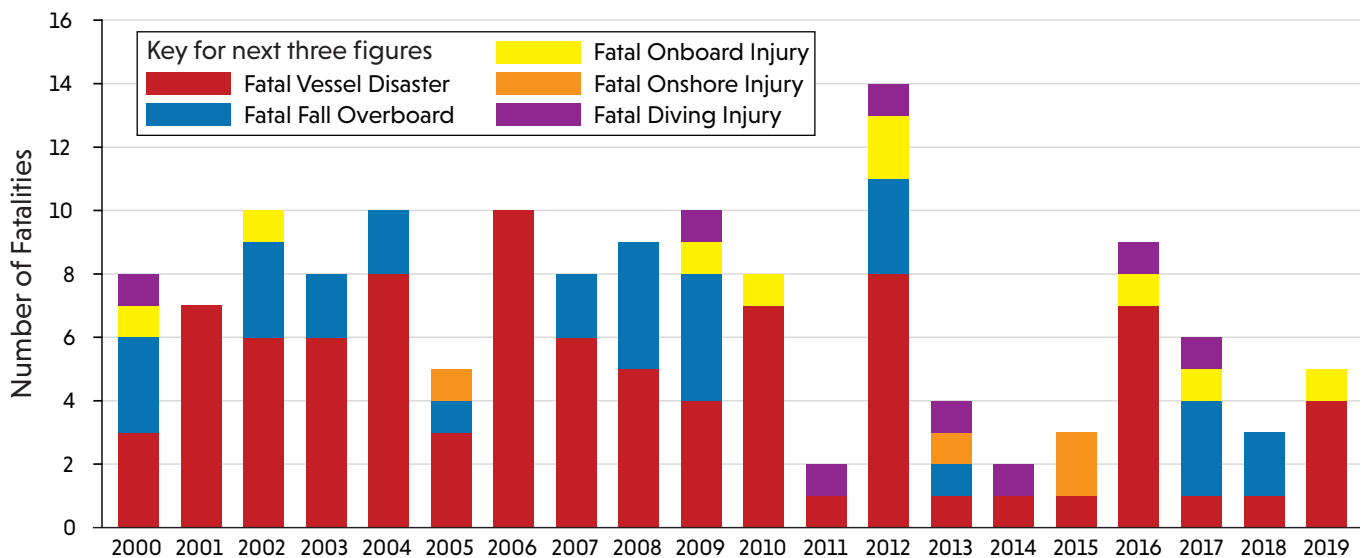


## About this Report

This report is a five-year update (2015–2019) on commercial fishing fatalities on the West Coast of the United States. Two related reports were previously published on commercial fishing fatalities on the West Coast during 2000–2009 and 2010–2014. They are available at [cdc.gov/niosh/fishing/data-research/regional-summaries/commercial-fishing-safety.html](https://www.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.

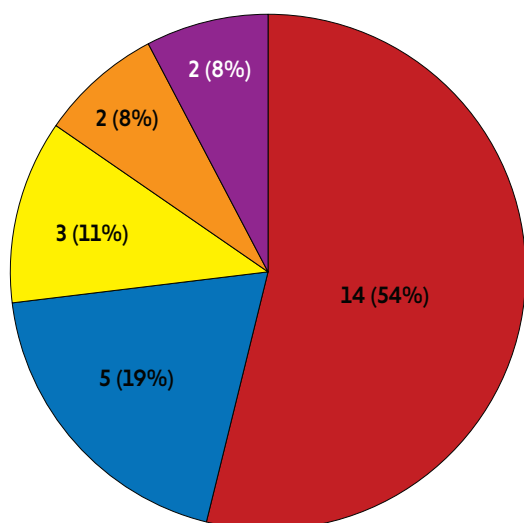
## Overview of Commercial Fishing Fatalities

**Figure 1. Commercial Fishing Fatalities by Year and Incident Type, West Coast, 2000–2019 (141 Total)<sup>1</sup>**



During the 20-year period 2000–2019, 141 deaths occurred in West Coast fisheries, averaging about seven fatalities annually (*Figure 1*). For the most recent five-year period (2015–2019), 26 commercial fishing fatalities were recorded, averaging about five fatalities annually. This is a decrease over the preceding five-year period (2010–2014) (30 fatalities). There was also a slight decrease in the number of fatalities over the full 20 year period (2000–2019).

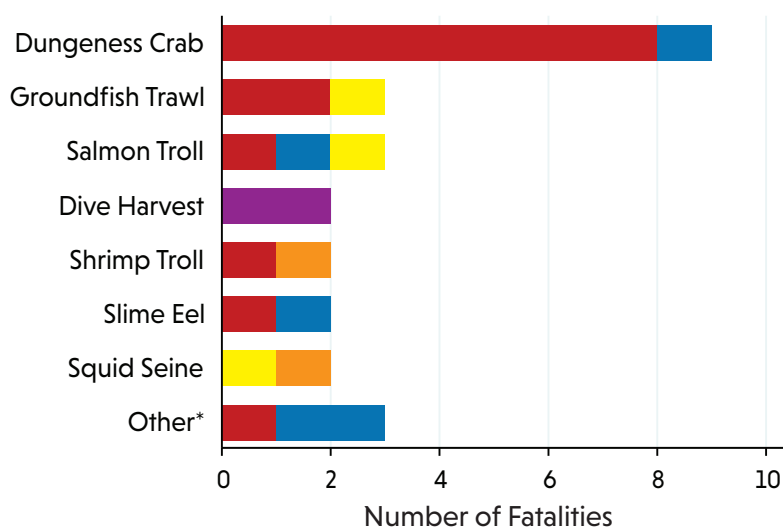
**Figure 2. Commercial Fishing Fatalities by Incident Type, West Coast, 2015–2019 (26 Total)<sup>1</sup>**



Ten vessel disasters resulted in the deaths of 14 crewmembers, accounting for 54% of all deaths during 2015–2019 (*Figure 2*). Vessel disasters include sinkings or other events that force crews to abandon ship. Drowning following a fall overboard was the second leading cause of death with five fatalities (19%).

During the five-year period preceding this report (2010–2014), vessel disasters accounted for 60% of fatalities among crewmembers on the West Coast, with falls overboard and diving fatalities contributing to 13% each. In the five-year period of this report (2015–2019), the proportion of fatalities due to vessel disasters decreased to 54% while fatal falls overboard increased to 19% and diving fatalities decreased to 8%. Onboard and onshore fatalities remained about the same.

**Figure 3. Commercial Fishing Fatalities by Fleet, West Coast, 2015–2019 (26 Total)<sup>1</sup>**



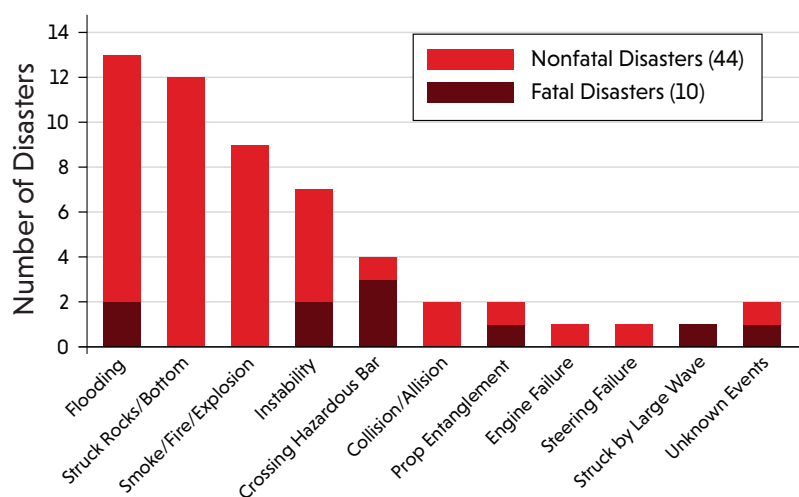
\*Other fleets are those that had a single fatality during 2015–2019: salmon set gillnet, sablefish, tuna trawl.

Seven West Coast fleets had at least two fatalities during 2015–2019 (Figure 3). The state-managed Dungeness crab fleet lost nine crewmembers: seven from three vessel disasters involving inbound vessels crossing river bars during hazardous sea conditions in Oregon.

The groundfish trawl and salmon troll fleets experienced the second highest number of fatalities with three deaths each, stemming from a mixture of vessel disasters, falls overboard, and fatal onboard injuries. The tribal dive harvest fishery lost two crewmembers in Washington who drowned while harvesting urchins and geoduck clams.

## Vessel Disasters

**Figure 4. Causes of Vessel Disasters, West Coast, 2015–2019 (54 Disasters Total; 44 Nonfatal, 10 Fatal)<sup>1</sup>**



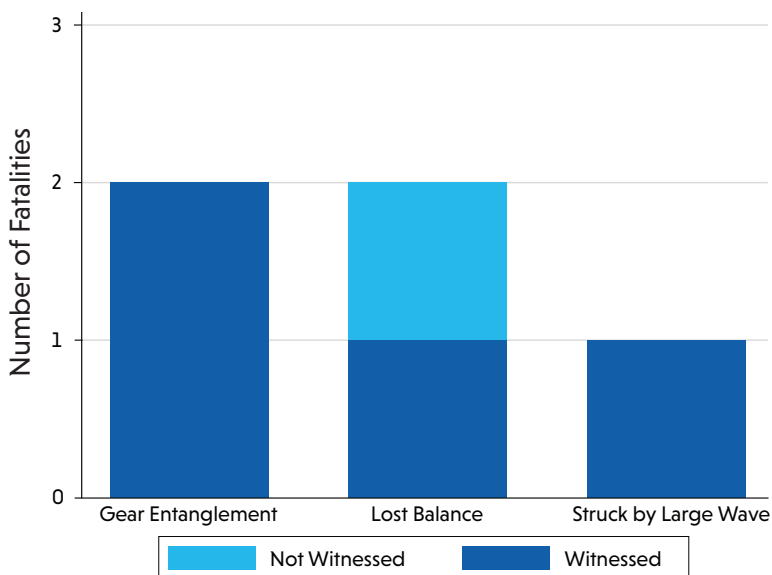
Vessel disasters resulted in the most fatalities during 2015–2019. A total of 54 vessel disasters occurred in West Coast waters during this period (Figure 4), forcing 177 crewmembers to abandon ship and face serious risk of cold-water immersion and death. While 92% of crewmembers involved in vessel disasters survived, 10 disasters resulted in 14 fatalities. The leading cause of vessel disasters was flooding. There were 13 vessel disasters, with two of these disasters resulting in fatalities. Although crossing hazardous river bars only caused four vessel disasters, it was the leading cause of fatalities with seven deaths.

Vessel disasters are extremely hazardous due to the risk of cold-water immersion and drowning. Three disasters occurred as inbound Dungeness crab vessels were transiting Oregon river bars during hazardous sea conditions. All three vessels were capsized by large waves resulting in seven deaths. Vessel operators can reduce the risk of capsizing by avoiding crossing river bars during hazardous conditions. If a bar crossing is unavoidable, don personal flotation devices (PFDs) or immersion suits, and contact the Coast Guard for assistance. 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, West Coast, 2015–2019 (5 Total)<sup>1</sup>



During 2015–2019, five crewmembers died from drowning after falling overboard, which was the second leading cause of death contributing to 19% of fatalities on the West Coast (Figure 5). None of the crewmembers were wearing PFDs when they drowned. Four (80%) of the falls overboard were witnessed by other crewmembers. However, without a PFD to provide flotation, swimming failure and drowning occurred before their crewmates were able to rescue them from the water.

Drowning after falling overboard or off a dock remains a persistent yet preventable problem 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.



## Other Hazards



### Onboard

During 2015–2019, three crewmembers died from traumatic injuries sustained onboard fishing vessels, contributing to 12% of fatalities on the West Coast. These onboard fatalities resulted from one crewmember being struck by a falling mast, one becoming entangled in a propeller shaft, and one electrocution inside an electric panel. Two of the deaths occurred during fishing operations at sea, and one on a moored vessel in port.



### Onshore

During 2015–2019, two crewmembers died from a traumatic injury sustained onshore, contributing to 8% of fatalities on the West Coast. These fatalities involved crewmembers falling off docks and drowning without PFDs.



### Diving

During 2015–2019, two crewmembers died from traumatic injuries sustained while diving, contributing to 8% of fatalities on the West Coast. Both were engaged in dive harvesting geoducks and urchins in tribal fisheries in Northwest Washington. Both used surface-supplied air and drowned because of equipment problems.

# 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 – West Coast 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. 2025-113

### Get More Information

Find NIOSH products and get answers to workplace safety and health questions:  
1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636) | TTY: 1-888-232-6348  
[cdc.gov/cdc-info/](https://cdc.gov/cdc-info/) | [cdc.gov/niosh](https://cdc.gov/niosh)  
Monthly NIOSH eNews: [cdc.gov/niosh/eNews](https://cdc.gov/niosh/eNews)