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Editorial

Arctic Rose's legacy in limbo

The tragedy of the Seattle-based Arctic Rose fishing trawler will end with 15 names on a memorial and without leadership from the Coast Guard.

Commercial fishing is a dangerous occupation, but efforts to make the job a bit less hazardous will founder without enforcement powers leading the way for change. Relying on good intentions is not likely to produce many voluntary improvements that save lives. Prove us wrong.

Exhaustive study, 65 interviews and two trips to the site produced a highly informed and highly educated guess about what happened. That work in turn produced 31 recommendations that appear destined for a file drawer or computer disk.

For the record, the Marine Board of Investigation final report concluded: "The exact cause of the casualty is not known."

But 2-½ years of work by the Coast Guard and outside investigators pointed toward water pouring through an open rear hatch that should have been closed as the likely source of the sinking.

The Coast Guard was relentless in trying to understand what circumstances and events took the Arctic Rose down 428 feet on April 2, 2001, in the Bering Sea.

One change from earlier speculation added the weather as a contributing factor. Satellite images revealed a squall on what had been assumed to be a calm night.

The investigating panel recommended uniform training on safety requirements and procedures, especially for crew members with no maritime experience. Going to the apparent heart of this tragedy, the investigating panel wanted alarms on all watertight doors.

Most prickly of all, the investigating panel recommended stability testing for boats and an end to exemptions for some vessels. The 92-foot Arctic Rose had been modified over the years with

numerous structural changes.

The operative word from the panel is *recommended*, which drops to the deck with a dull thud. Its report was forwarded to Coast Guard Commandant Thomas H. Collins. He made clear existing regulations were largely adequate or desirable change would come quicker through voluntary action.

The Coast Guard has a history of arguing accidents and loss of life at sea are preventable. The memory of the Arctic Rose is best served by passing hard lessons on to the living.

The Coast Guard cannot be all things — an informed, interested and detached bystander.

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