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Tragic lessons from Arctic Rose

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As the Pacific Northwest knows, safer conditions for fishermen are the only good that can come out of a tragedy at sea. The Coast Guard's study of the Arctic Rose disaster will lead to at least some improvements.

After an extraordinary investigation, which included the repeated use of underwater cameras, the Coast Guard last week issued a final report on the 2001 sinking, which claimed the lives of all 15 crew members. The Coast Guard said that the accident probably occurred because of factors that included rough Bering Sea waters, design flaws and unsecured watertight doors.

The report called for 25 safety actions, including having alarms on watertight doors, revising vessel construction standards and requiring documentation of safety drills. The final report downgraded a few recommendations from mandatory to voluntary actions, including a suggestion that would have required the Coast Guard to ask Congress for tougher safety rules on some older fishing vessels. Although a mandatory approach would have provided more certainty, the main point is for ship owners to make the changes.

Congress, moreover, doesn't need a Coast Guard request to review fishing safety, including larger areas such as vessel inspections and crew licensing. The Arctic Rose sinking was the worst accident involving a U.S. commercial fishing vessel since 1951, when 15 people died off New England. Lawmakers ought to look over the Coast Guard's shoulder to make sure that the safety improvements are appropriately extensive.

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