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Coast Guard 'wimped out' with safety plan, experts warn

By Gary Stoller, USA TODAY

New Coast Guard recommendations for commercial fishing boats will do little to improve safety, two marine experts say.

The recommendations were released last week in a report on the sinking of the Arctic Rose, a Seattle-based fishing trawler. The 93-foot boat most likely sank after it flooded with water in the Bering Sea in April 2001, the Coast Guard said. All 15 people aboard were killed — the most fatalities on a U.S. fishing boat since the same number died in the Atlantic in 1951.

The report contains 25 recommendations calling for such steps as improved crew training and revised boat construction standards.

But they don't go far enough, say Richard Hiscock, who was an adviser to a 1999 Coast Guard fishing-safety task force, and Steve Finley, a former congressional staff member who worked to adopt fishing safety regulations in the late 1980s.

"The Coast Guard could have said something meaningful, and they blew it," says Hiscock.

Hiscock and Finley say the Coast Guard should have called for mandatory government safety inspections of fishing boats. Under current regulations, such inspections are voluntary.

Finley says a safety inspection is mandatory for a 200-foot cargo vessel sailing with a six-person crew on Washington's Puget Sound but not on a 350-foot fish-processing vessel operating with a crew of 150 in rougher waters like the Bering Sea.

"Essentially, the Coast Guard wimped out and did not call for fishing and fish-processing vessels to meet the same inspection requirements of cargo and passenger vessels," he says.

In a written statement to USA TODAY, the Coast Guard says it submitted suggested legislation for authorities to conduct inspections of fishing boats two years ago, but Congress didn't act on it. The agency says it "does see the value of conducting dockside examinations and safety checks on fishing vessels, especially just before the fishing season opens."

But mandatory inspection of fishing boats wouldn't have prevented the Arctic Rose accident, the Coast Guard says. "The primary contributing factor to this casualty was the vessel's watertight integrity was not maintained," the Coast Guard says.

Hiscock says a safety inspection program with appropriate design, construction and maintenance standards might have prevented the Arctic Rose from sinking.

In its accident report, the Coast Guard says that flooding of the Arctic Rose was most likely aided by a door on the boat that was left open and recommends development of rules requiring alarms that sound when doors are left open. But Coast Guard Rear Adm. T.H. Gilmour states in the report that voluntary compliance — rather than regulation — "is more appropriate and more likely to be completed faster."

Hiscock disagrees. "If leaving a door open is a human error and an alarm system will mitigate it, why not make alarm systems mandatory?" he says.

Last year, 43 people were killed and 70 boats lost while working in the fishing industry in the USA, according to Dave Beach, chief of the Coast Guard's commercial fishing safety office. In 2002, 35 people died and 90 boats were lost.

"Fishing has been, and always will be, one of the most dangerous environments to work in," he says.

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