

Lessons Learned from Accident Investigations

Better Safety Precautions Urged for Charter Fishing Vessels in Hazardous Weather

Marine safety advocates expressed frustration, anger, and disbelief when they issued the final accident report on the 2003 capsizing of a charter fishing vessel that cost 11 lives.

National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is so concerned about the issues raised in the accident investigation that they urge all marine charters to examine how they operate in hazardous water conditions, to pay attention to safety regulations, and to tighten up on their safety precautions.

“A shocking lack of safety awareness and an inexplicable lapse in common sense led to a tragedy that should not have happened,” said Mark V. Rosenker, acting chairman of the NTSB. The simple and common sense task of putting on life jackets, which was ignored by the boat’s crew, could have saved lives, he said.

The NTSB has issued its final report on the capsizing of the small charter fishing vessel *Taki-Too*, which occurred in 2003. The accident occurred shortly after the *Taki-Too* departed from Tillamook Bay in Oregon to the Pacific Ocean, claiming the lives of 11 of the 19 persons onboard, including the captain.

The U.S. charter fishing vessel was en route from the marina at Garibaldi, Oregon, to the open seas for a day of fishing. A small craft advisory was in effect for the northern Oregon and southern Washington coasts, and personnel at the U.S. Coast Guard Station Tillamook Bay had activated the rough bar warning signs because of the hazardous conditions.

At the Tillamook Bay inlet, the *Taki-Too* operator waited for about 30 minutes in the channel for an opening in the ocean swells so that he could cross the bar. After the *Taki-Too* exited the inlet and turned northward around the north jetty, a wave struck and capsized the vessel. “Two flawed decisions, one to cross the bar in hazardous conditions and the other not to don life jackets led to this accident and the loss of life,” Rosenker said. “It is vital that the marine industry learns the lessons from this tragic accident and not repeat them,” he added.

The NTSB also urged small passenger vessel owners and members of the National Marine Charter Association to develop and implement “go/no go” policies, based on risk-management principles, regarding transiting bars and inlets. It also urged the Coast Guard and members of the National Marine Charter Association to require passengers of such vessels on the West Coast to wear lifejackets while transiting bars and inlets where rough bar warnings are in effect. The recommendations address operations conducted in Coast Guard-designated surf stations and regulated boating areas.

NTSB investigators made numerous conclusions, including:

- The absence of a “go/no-go” policy by the charter boat owners operating out of Tillamook Bay allowed the masters to exercise poor judgment in deciding to cross the bar, given the hazardous sea conditions.
- If the master of the *Taki-Too* had required passengers and crew to wear life jackets, their chances of survival would have been better and the number of fatalities in this accident would probably have been lower.
- The Coast Guard’s failure to enforce regulations, which require that life jackets be worn during possibly hazardous conditions, contributed to the loss of life in the *Taki-Too* accident.
- The other commercial vessel masters who crossed the Tillamook Bay bar on the morning of the accident should have required their passengers to wear life jackets during the transit.

The Safety Board determined that the probable cause of the accident was the decision of the master to attempt to cross the bar despite the hazardous sea state that existed at the time. Contributing to the severity of the accident was the failure of the master to ensure that he and all aboard donned life jackets before crossing the bar. Also contributing to the severity of the accident was the failure of the U.S. Coast Guard to enforce its rules requiring vessel masters to have passengers wear life jackets before attempting a hazardous bar crossing.

For a complete copy of the accident report, visit the NTSB’s Web site at www.nts.gov.