



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: January 13, 1988

In reply refer to: M-87-122 and -123

Mr. W. A. Nott
 President
 Sportfishing Association of California
 555 E. Ocean Blvd., Suite 700-A
 Long Beach, California 90802

About 1310 on February 5, 1987, the 55-foot-long, wooden-hulled, U.S. charter fishing vessel FISH-N-FOOL capsized in Mexican territorial waters about 4 nmi west of the western coast of Baja California Norte, Mexico, and about 150 nmi south of San Diego, California. Most of the 12 persons on board were on deck at the time of the capsizing and were thrown into the 62° F seawater. The captain was in the wheelhouse and was not seen after the vessel capsized. Eight persons began swimming toward 2 1/2-nmi-distant San Martin Island shortly after the capsizing; none was wearing a personal flotation device. The alternate operator remained near the capsized vessel and managed to board a lifefloat. The vessel sank several hours later. About 2000, one passenger was rescued from the water by Mexican fishermen from San Martin Island. About 2030, the alternate operator was hoisted from the lifefloat by U.S. Coast Guard helicopter Dolphin 6547. The search continued through the following day, but no more survivors were found. The FISH-N-FOOL was valued at \$175,000. 1/

After the alternate operator was hoisted on board Dolphin 6547, the helicopter crew quickly obtained from her the number of persons who had been on board the FISH-N-FOOL. Later, the identities of those persons were also obtained easily. However, had there been no survivors or had the alternate operator been unable to provide the information--for example, as a result of unconsciousness due to hypothermia--it would have been difficult and time-consuming to obtain. Search and rescue authorities need to know the number of persons involved in an accident to conduct an efficient and effective search, and that information would have been readily available if a passenger and crew list had been left ashore.

1/ For more detailed information, read Marine Accident Report--"Capsizing of the U.S. Charter Fishing Vessel FISH-N-FOOL, Pacific Ocean at Roca Ben, Baja California Norte, Mexico, February 5, 1987" (NTSB/MAR-87/11).

Shortly after they were thrown into the water, some passengers and the deckhand decided to swim to San Martin Island. According to the surviving passenger, the vessel was on the opposite side of the turbulent water from them and swimming to the island was the "only choice." However, the distance to San Martin Island was significantly greater than the distance around the turbulence to the vessel, none of these persons was wearing a life preserver, and all knew that the vessel was still afloat. Their decision-making abilities might have been adversely affected by the trauma of being unexpectedly thrown into the cold, turbulent water. However, in attempting to reach San Martin Island, they disregarded an accepted axiom of survival at sea--stay with the vessel as long as possible. Because vessels are larger than persons, the probability is higher that vessels will be seen by searchers. Also, and even in the worst circumstances, some lifesaving equipment usually will float free of a sinking vessel, as occurred with the four lifefloats and several life preservers in this case. Although they did not float free immediately, the lifefloats and life preservers were more than sufficient to keep all the passengers and crewmembers afloat. If the passengers and the deckhand had elected to return to the vessel, they probably could have climbed into the lifefloats with the alternate operator. The National Transportation Safety Board concludes that the passengers and the deckhand should have attempted to return to the vessel after the capsizing. They should not have attempted to swim to 2 1/2-nmi-distant San Martin Island.

The circumstances of this accident clearly demonstrate the need for complete passenger safety briefings. The major purpose of a safety briefing is to acquaint persons who are unfamiliar with the marine environment with the lifesaving equipment available and the procedures to follow in an emergency. The briefing described by the alternate operator included the location of the life preservers, but did not include any other instructions regarding lifesaving equipment or emergency procedures. Since no information about the lifefloats was included in the briefing, the passengers might not have realized that the lifefloats would float free if the vessel sank. If the passengers had been instructed in the use and operation of the lifefloats and in the importance of remaining near the vessel, they might have decided to attempt to swim around the turbulence to the vessel, and more of them might have survived. The Safety Board continues to believe that a complete passenger safety briefing is vital to passenger safety on vessels like the FISH-N-FOOL. The Safety Board also believes that the safety briefing should be given to the passengers verbally by a licensed crewmember. A verbal briefing could reinforce the safety information presented in instructive placards and would show that persons in authority, such as the captain and alternate operator, support the safety instructions.

As a result of its investigation, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Sportfishing Association of California:

Recommend that members deposit a passenger and crew list at a suitable location ashore before departing on an offshore voyage. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-87-122)

Remind members of the regulatory requirements for passenger safety briefings and recommend that the briefings be given before each voyage by suitable public announcements. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-87-123)

Also as a result of its investigation, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations M-87-113 through -119 to the U.S. Coast Guard and Safety Recommendations M-87-120 and -121 to the U.S. Department of State.

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility ". . . to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any actions taken as a result of its safety recommendations and would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendations in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendations M-87-122 and -123 in your reply.

BURNETT, Chairman, and LAUBER, NALL, and KOLSTAD, Members, concurred in these recommendations. GOLDMAN, Vice Chairman, did not participate.

By:  Jim Burnett
Chairman