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Safety Training Saves Lives of Alaska's Fishermen

Feature by PA2 Christopher McLaughlin

Alaska has nearly one million square miles of some the most dangerous yet plentiful fishing grounds on Earth. Despite the danger, fishermen by the thousands continue to make a living in an environment known for its extreme weather, unpredictable seas, and remote locations.



KODIAK, Alaska – Steve Campbell, a Kodiak area training coordinator with Alaska Marine Safety Education Association, instructs fishermen how to form up in a group wearing immersion suits during a maritime accident at sea drill. USCG photo by PA2 Christopher D. McLaughlin.

To counteract the challenges of this deadly environment, the Coast Guard and the Alaska Marine Safety Education Association (AMSEA) provide mariners educational instruction on how to improve their chances of survival during a maritime accident.

“The AMSEA program has been offered to fishermen since 1990, because guys weren’t coming home,” said Steven Campbell, AMSEA Kodiak area training coordinator. “When I first started doing it many guys didn’t know how to operate anything.”

The program was slow in gaining interest from the fishing community when the program debuted in 1990. Since Campbell began instructing in 1999, he has seen a big change in the number of people doing the training.

“More and more people are getting more and more familiar with their equipment,” said Campbell. “They’re getting better educated about their equipment, taking care of their equipment, and knowing how to operate it.”

In addition to being familiar with equipment, Campbell stresses the need for mariners to have a plan. He explained that knowing what to do in case of emergency will ultimately alleviate panic, which time and time again results in fatalities. To ensure fishermen know what to do, the Coast Guard provides free vessel safety checks year round.

“We’re there for the fishermen and to do the safety checks and decal exams, just to make sure everyone has the right equipment and will be safe out there,” said Coast Guard Petty Officer 3rd Class Nathan Christensen, Marine Safety Detachment Kodiak inspector. “We want everyone to go out and have a great season and come back safe and alive to their families.”



KODIAK, Alaska - Coast Guard Petty Officer 2nd Class Nathan Christensen, Marine Safety Detachment Kodiak inspector, examines Steve Eggemeyer’s, vessel documentation near Dog Bay in Kodiak. The inspection was part of annual pre season dockside exams conducted by Coast Guard Marine Safety Detachment Kodiak. USCG photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Christopher D. McLaughlin.

In addition to Coast Guard examinations, AMSEA provides hands on training to mariners through several different courses. These include marine safety instructor training, onboard drills, water wise instructor, and outdoor survival educator’s workshops. Courses can also be customized to meet the needs of boaters and the boating practices of a specific area or industry. Campbell noted that the AMSEA program is also reaching out to rural Alaska.

“We are working with open skiff fishermen to get them the required safety equipment and teaching them how to use it,” Campbell said. “It’s going to hit everybody. Every commercial fisherman in the state of Alaska is required to have this training and we’re trying to get it to them. It’s all applicable, no matter which side of the fence you’re on, whether you’re a commercial or recreational boater.”

Before AMSEA the commercial fishing industry in Alaska was averaging a loss of 38 lives a year. Due to the spread of AMSEA that loss has been reduced to about 11 lives a year for the past 5 years in Alaska, according to the AMSEA website.

“I’ve fished up here since 1977, and I’ve known a lot of people that haven’t come home,” Campbell said. “That’s my motive. I’d like to see everybody come home.”

Individuals who would like to learn more about AMSEA and its programs can visit <http://www.amsea.org/index.html>.

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