

Occupations and Workplaces

Commercial Fishing

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What should I know before reading about this occupation?

This profile summarizes the common issues and duties for commercial fishing operations. It is impossible to predict all of the possible hazards a commercial fishing person may encounter. The demands can be sporadic and unpredictable with intermittent periods of intense physical and psychological stress. This summary focuses on the major job duties that most commercial fishing persons (those fishing primarily from a vessel on water) would have in common.

This document is not specific to enforcement, rescue, or diving operations. These occupations require specific training and qualifications beyond the general information provided here.

Briefly, what does a commercial fishing person do?

The main duties of a commercial fishing person include:

- Use instruments and navigation aids.
- Maintain vessel and equipment.
- Housekeeping.
- Work outdoors in extreme environments.

- Lift, push, and pull the catch, cargo, and objects.
 - Work in the cold (e.g., weather, freezers, cold water).
 - Work with machinery, including winches and other rotating equipment.
 - Perform water rescue, as necessary.
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What are some health and safety hazards associated with commercial fishing?

Commercial fishing is done in an extreme environment, and uses various types of equipment. Because the environment can change quickly, it is important to remain alert to any changes. Hazards include (but are not limited to):

- [Working on or near water](#), including cold-water shock and immersion
- [Drowning](#)
- Injuries from fish spines, bones, teeth, or bacteria
- Working outdoors:
 - Weather (including [lightning](#))
 - [Cold environments](#)
 - [Hot environments](#)
 - [Humidex rating](#)
 - [Ultraviolet radiation](#) (sunlight)
 - [Extreme climate events](#)
 - [Working safely around stinging Insects](#)
 - Diseases transmitted by insect bites, including [Lyme Disease](#) and [West Nile Virus](#)
- Working at heights, including the use of [body belts, harnesses and lanyards](#)
- Working in [confined spaces](#)
- Working near machinery, including using [safeguards](#)
- Working with [hand tools](#) and [powered hand tools](#)
- Chemical hazards, including following [WHMIS](#) – the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System
- [Noise](#)
- [Slips, trips, falls](#)

- Working on [ladders](#)
- [Work-related musculoskeletal disorders](#)
- Lifting and [materials handling](#)
- [Pulling and pushing](#)
- Damage to the boat, including [fire](#) collision, grounding, capsizing,
- [Fatigue](#) from [long hours of work](#) or [shiftwork](#)
- [Food and kitchen hygiene](#)
- [Cooking](#) safely
- [Working with sharp blades or edges](#)
- [Working alone](#)
- [Workplace violence and harassment](#)

Two key concerns that have been identified in the commercial fishing industry include modifications made to vessels and their impacts on stability, and inadequate or failure to use lifesaving equipment (i.e., personal flotation devices, immersion suits, and emergency signalling devices). These concerns are highlighted by the number of deaths occurring due to people falling overboard, and vessels capsizing, which are two of the most common causes of death ([Transportation Safety Board of Canada](#), 2022).

What emergency response procedures should be in place?

All crew members should know how to respond to a person overboard, fire on board, and flooding of the boat. The crew must also know how to abandon ship, and to call for help using any radios, phones, flares, distress flags, or other emergency signals. All crew should also know the location and use of safety equipment, engine room components and controls, deck equipment and rigging, and navigation equipment and electronic devices. The crew should also know how to safely use the fishing equipment, how to anchor the boat, and how to escape the boat. Everyone on board the vessel should know what their responsibilities are in the event of an emergency, where to access the appropriate equipment and how to use it, and what procedures need to be followed.. Learn exactly what specific requirements and regulations apply to your vessel.

Drills should be done regularly, including at the beginning of the season, and anytime when new crew is on board. Drills can include how to abandon ship, how to deal with a situation (flood, fire, collision, etc.), how to put on the immersion suit, and how to rescue a person who fell overboard. Use of life jackets or personal flotation devices (PFDs) is required by law. Immersion suits are also recommended when working over cold water.

What are some general steps a commercial fishing operation should take?

- Before leaving port, inspect and test equipment including the hull of the boat, watertight doors and hatches, all alarm systems, and rescue equipment. Keep doors and hatches closed to avoid flooding.
- Keep all machinery in good repair, and make sure all guards and emergency stop devices are installed and working correctly. Regularly inspect all rescue equipment and report any damage to the vessel master. Do not wear loose-fitting clothing or dangling jewellery or rings as they may get caught in nets, lines, or machinery. Tie back long hair.
- When boarding or leaving the vessel, use the gangway or ladder. Don't jump.
- Decks should have non-slip surfaces (except where a smooth surface is required to handle fish). Keep decks clear and uncluttered.
- Stow all ropes in coils. Tie down or stow loose equipment. Clean up spills and manage any water or ice issues to avoid slips and falls.
- Vessels with galleys and crew quarters will need to manage food and kitchen cleanliness to prevent food borne diseases, as well as knowing how to work safely with sharp blades or knives. In addition, cooking must be managed in a small space that moves with the motion of the vessel. Store utensils in racks and drawers, and use a guardrail on the stove to help stop pots and pans from moving.
- Make sure that cabins and living quarters are well-ventilated, and use alarms to alert the crew (e.g., carbon monoxide detectors).
- Never stand in or around loose rope or wire to avoid getting entangled, especially when wires, ropes or nets are moving.
- Wear heavy gloves or mitts when handling wire rope, and never guide wire with your hands or feet.
- Do not stand under a load or in areas where overhead equipment may swing.
- Make sure the vessel is equipped with the appropriate life saving equipment (e.g., personal flotation devices, emergency signals), and crew members are trained on how to access and use the equipment.
- Follow requirements and guidelines on vessel stability, including ensuring the crew is trained on and has access to relevant information and having stability assessments performed when required.

What should be done for fall protection when working at heights?

Falling overboard is a serious hazard. In addition, there are times when a person has to work suspended above the deck (aloft). When working on deck or aloft take the following precautions:

- Develop and implement a [fall protection program](#) and train workers.
- Use a lifeline when working aloft or when on deck during adverse weather conditions.
- Use a lifeline and safety belt when trap fishing.
- Wear fall protection if a person could fall about 3 metres (10 feet). Check with your jurisdiction for exact requirements.
- Make sure that no other gear you may be wearing will interfere with the self-inflating mechanism of the PFD.
- Make sure that the radar is turned off before you go aloft to avoid radiation exposure and prevent injury from a rotating scanner. Put a "Do Not Operate Radar - Persons Working Aloft" sign on the radar control panel to alert others that someone is working aloft.
- Attach safety lanyards to all tools and parts (e.g., secure your hammer to your wrist) to prevent items from dropping and injuring those below. Raise or lower your tools by using rigging and placing the tools in a safe container.
- Use a bosun's chair or similar device (a device with a rigid seat attached to a rope used to suspend a person to perform work) with appropriate safety harness and fall arresting gear. See the [CCOHS Factsheets on fall protection](#) for more information.

What are some general safe work practices to know?

All workers should:

- Follow safe work procedures.
- Follow emergency and first aid procedures.
- Know when and how to use personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Know how to report a hazard.
- Know about WHMIS and Safety Data Sheets (SDSs).
- Follow good housekeeping procedures.

Where can I find more information?

More information is available from:

- Transport Canada: [Marine Transportation](#), [Commercial Fishing Safety](#), [Adequate stability and safety guidelines for fishing vessels](#)
- Work Safe for Life / Workers Compensation Board of Nova Scotia: [Fisheries](#)
- WorkSafe BC: [Fishing and other marine](#)
- Government of Canada: [Fishing Vessel Safety Regulations \(Federal\)](#)

(*We have mentioned these organizations as a means of providing a potentially useful referral. You should contact the organization(s) directly for more information about their services. Please note that mention of these organizations does not represent a recommendation or endorsement by CCOHS of these organizations over others of which you may be aware.)

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