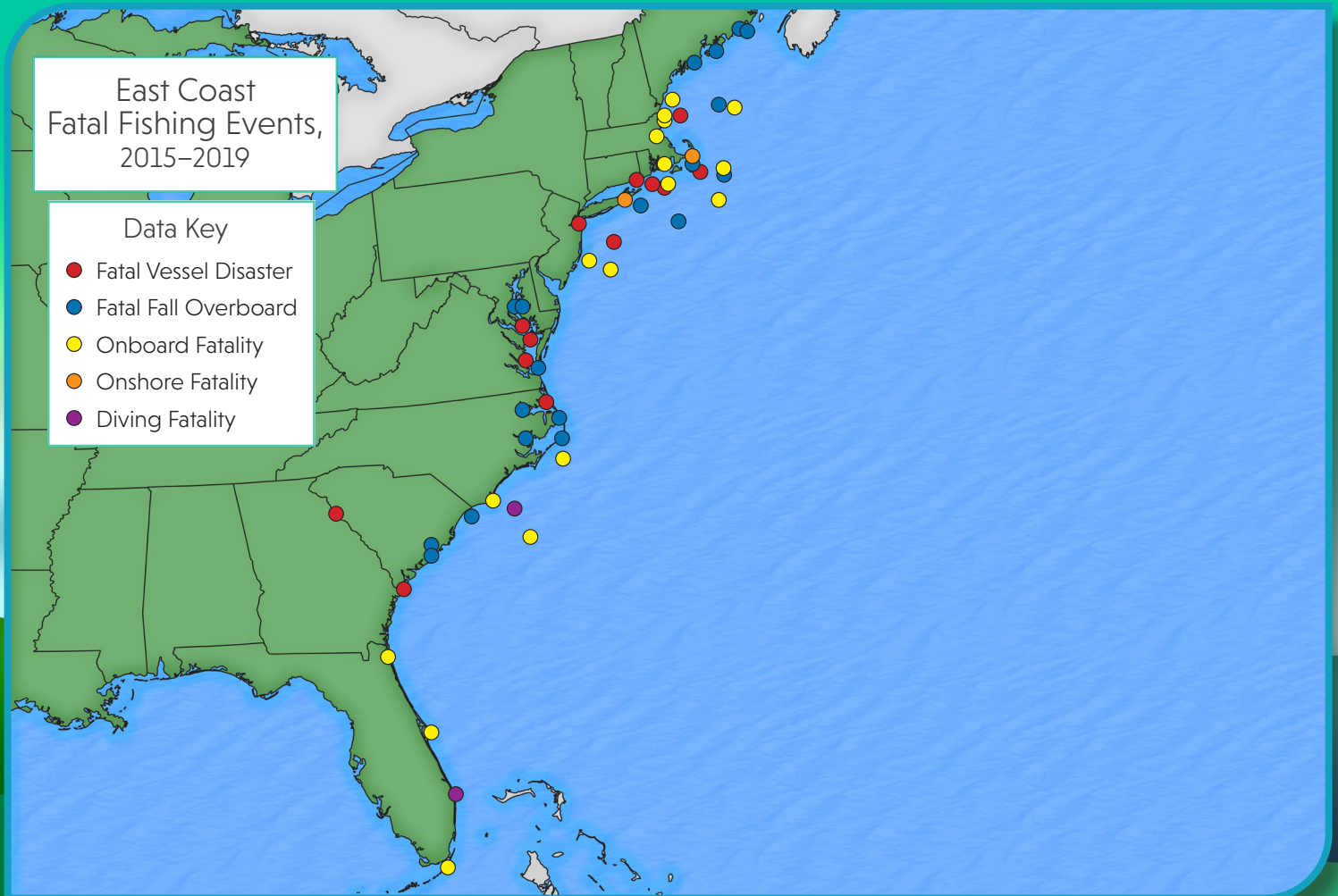


Commercial Fishing Fatality Summary

East Coast Region



U.S. CENTERS FOR DISEASE
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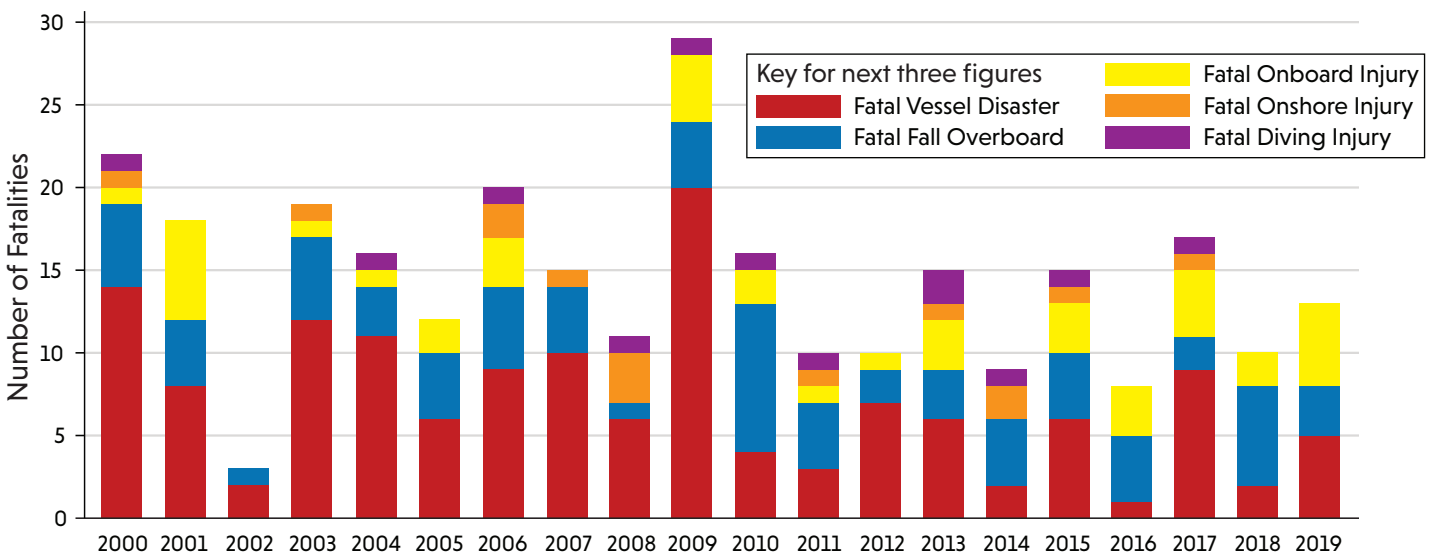
cdc.gov/niosh/fishing/data-research/regional-summaries/

About this Report

This report is a five-year update (2015–2019) on commercial fishing fatalities on the East Coast of the United States. Two related reports were previously published on commercial fishing fatalities on the East Coast during 2000–2009 and 2010–2014. They are available at [cdc.gov/niosh/fishing/data-research/regional-summaries/commercial-fishing-safety.html](https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/fishing/data-research/regional-summaries/commercial-fishing-safety.html) and can be used for comparison with this current report. This updated report is one in a set of four summarizing the most recent fatality and vessel disaster data for US fishing regions: Alaska, West Coast, East Coast, and the Gulf Coast.

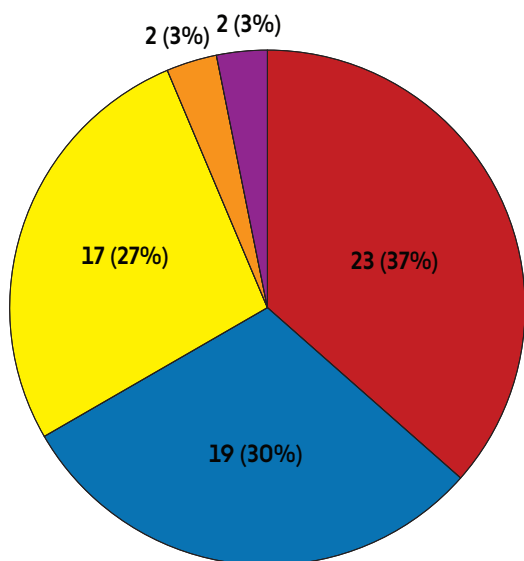
Overview of Commercial Fishing Fatalities

Figure 1. Commercial Fishing Fatalities by Year and Incident Type, East Coast, 2000–2019 (288 Total)¹



During the 20-year period 2000–2019, 288 deaths occurred in East Coast fisheries, averaging about 14 fatalities annually (Figure 1). For the most recent five-year period (2015–2019), 63 commercial fishing fatalities were recorded, averaging about 13 fatalities annually. This is about the same number of fatalities as the preceding five-year period (2010–2014) (60 fatalities). Over the 20 years 2000–2019, there was no overall trend (increase or decrease) in the number of fatalities.

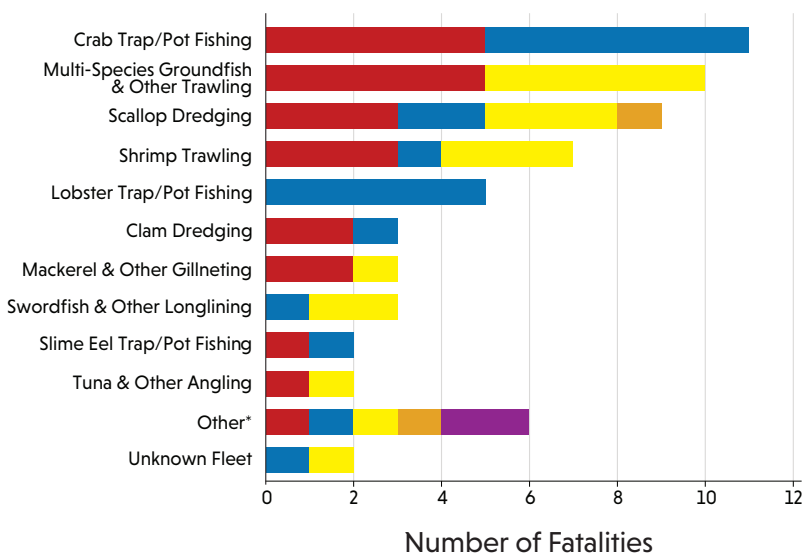
Figure 2. Commercial Fishing Fatalities by Incident Type, East Coast, 2015–2019 (63 Total)¹



Thirteen vessel disasters resulted in the deaths of 23 crewmembers, accounting for 37% of all deaths during 2015–2019 (Figure 2). Vessel disasters include sinkings or other events that force crews to abandon ship. Drowning following a fall overboard was the second leading cause of death with 19 fatalities (30%), and fatalities due to traumatic injuries onboard vessels resulted in 17 deaths (27%).

During the five-year period preceding this report (2010–2014), vessel disasters accounted for 37% of fatalities among crewmembers on the East Coast, with falls overboard and onboard fatalities contributing to 37% and 12% respectively. In the 5-year period of this report (2015–2019), the proportion of fatalities due to vessel disasters remained the same at 37% while fatal falls overboard decreased to 30% and onboard fatalities increased to 27%.

Figure 3. Commercial Fishing Fatalities by Fleet, East Coast, 2015–2019 (63 Total)¹



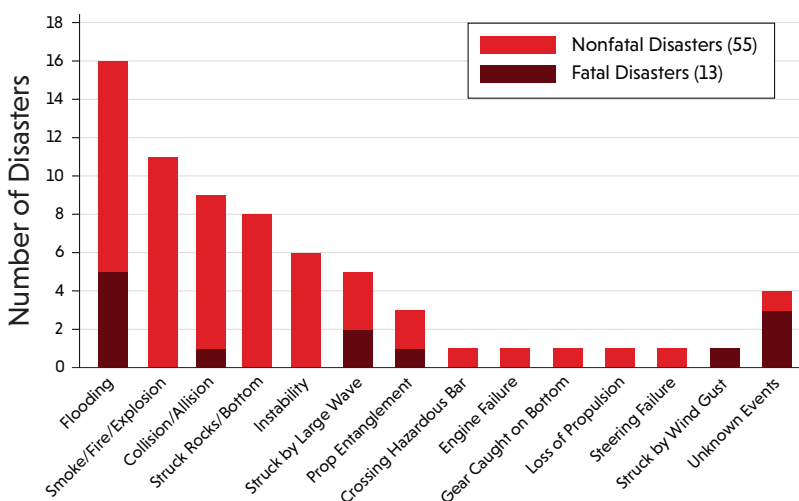
Ten East Coast fleets had at least two fatalities each during 2015–2019 (Figure 3). The crab fleet had 11 fatalities, five due to vessel disasters and six due to falls overboard. The groundfish trawl fleet lost 10 crewmembers, five due to vessel disasters and five due to traumatic injuries sustained onboard vessels.

The lobster fleet experienced five fatalities, a substantial decrease from 10 fatalities during the preceding five-year period (2010–2014). All five deaths were the result of falls overboard.

*Other fleets are those that had a single fatality during 2015–2019: Cast net fishing, Clam hand harvesting, Conch trap/pot fishing, Lobster dive harvesting, Menhaden seining, Snapper/Grouper spear fishing.

Vessel Disasters

Figure 4. Causes of Vessel Disasters, East Coast, 2015–2019 (68 Disasters Total; 55 Nonfatal, 13 Fatal)¹



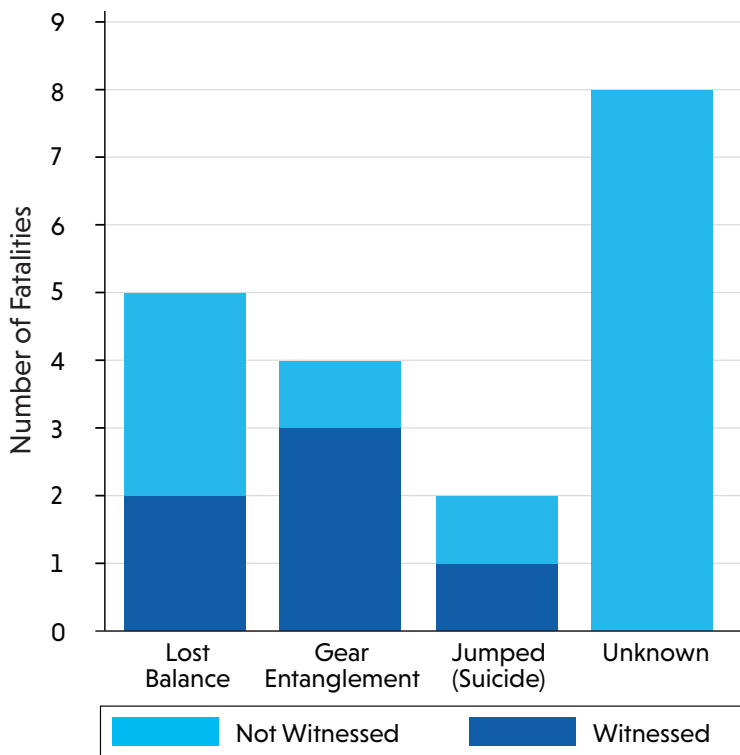
Vessel disasters are extremely hazardous due to the risk of immersion and drowning. Vessel disasters resulted in the most fatalities during 2015–2019. A total of 68 vessel disasters occurred on the East Coast during this period (Figure 4), forcing 187 crewmembers to abandon ship and face serious risk of immersion and death. While 88% of crewmembers involved in vessel disasters survived, 13 disasters resulted in 23 fatalities.

The leading cause of vessel disasters was flooding, with 16 vessel disasters, five of which resulted in eight fatalities. Two of these disasters involved down-flooding in severe weather conditions. In most cases, initial

flooding originated below the water line from damage to the hull and through-hull fittings. When flooding or other emergencies occur, don personal flotation devices (PFDs) and contact the Coast Guard early for assistance, even if to standby and keep in communication in case the situation worsens.

Falls Overboard

Figure 5. Causes of Fatal Falls Overboard, East Coast, 2015–2019 (19 Total)¹

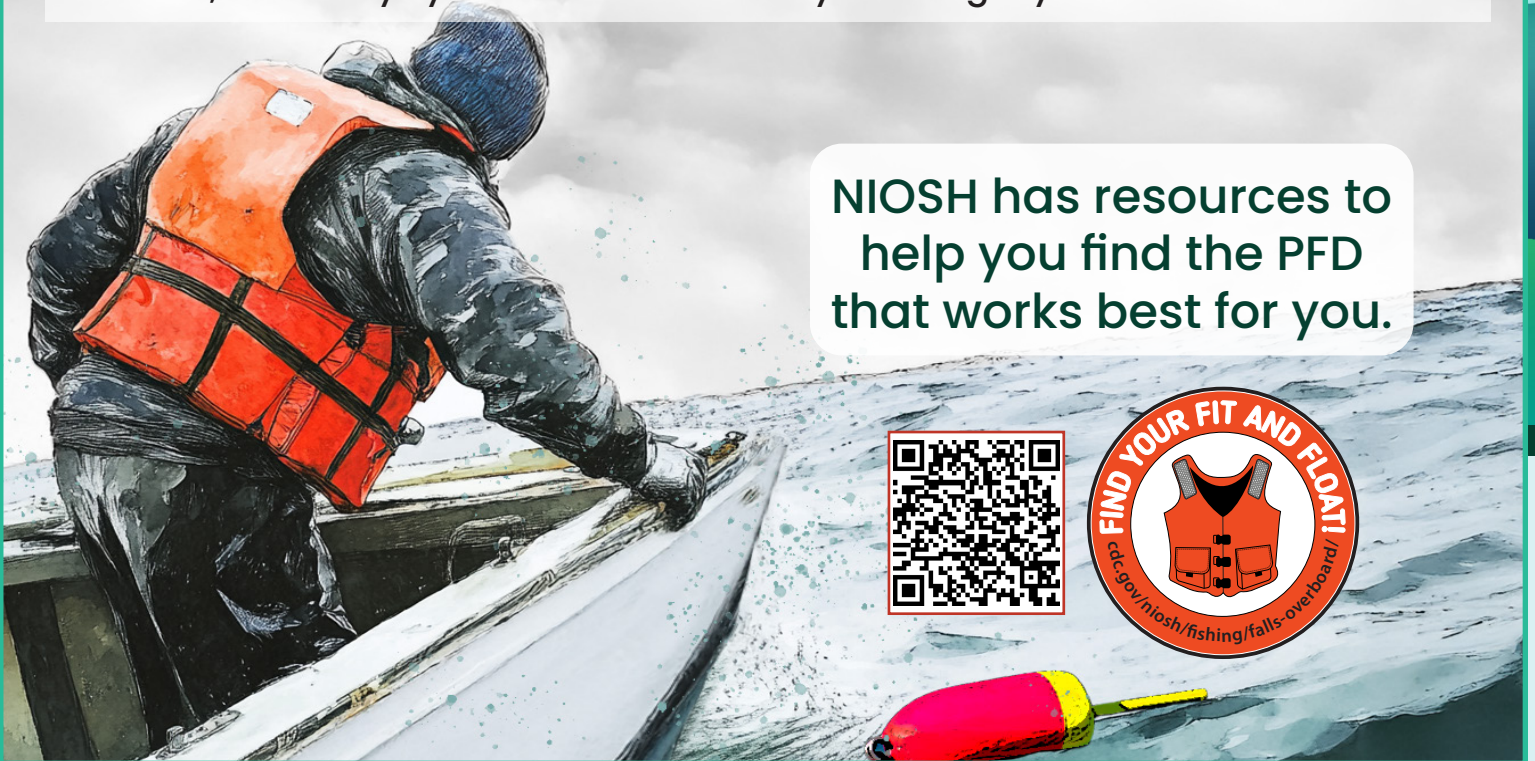


During 2015–2019, 19 crewmembers died from drowning after falling overboard, which was the second leading cause of death contributing to 30% of fatalities on the East Coast (Figure 5). Most of the falls overboard were not witnessed by other crewmembers (13, 68%), and none of the crewmembers were wearing PFDs or man-overboard alarms when they drowned. Without an alarm to alert other crewmembers and a PFD to provide flotation, swimming failure and drowning occurred before their crewmates were able to rescue them from the water.

Drowning after falling overboard or off a dock remain persistent yet preventable problems in the industry. All crewmembers should wear a PFD anytime they are working around water, such as working on deck, dockside, and when boarding and disembarking a vessel. A variety of PFD styles that are comfortable and do not snag are available for crewmembers.

You Can Survive a Fall Overboard!

The number one thing you can do to survive a fall overboard is float. Even in cold water, a PFD buys your crew time to find you and get you back over the rail.

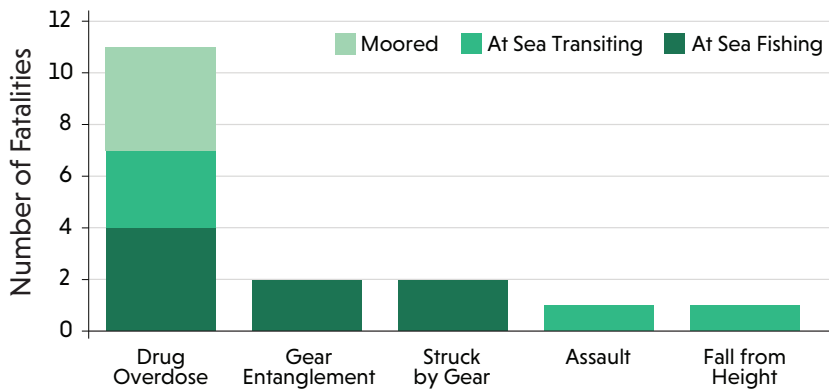


NIOSH has resources to help you find the PFD that works best for you.



Onboard Fatalities

Figure 6. Causes of Fatal Onboard Injuries, East Coast, 2015–2019 (17 Total)¹



During 2015–2019, 17 crewmembers died from traumatic injuries sustained onboard fishing vessels, contributing to 27% of fatalities on the East Coast. Of these 17 fatalities, 11 were due to unintentional drug overdoses. The remaining onboard fatalities involved two crewmembers being entangled in winches, two struck by gear, one fall from height and one homicide.

During 2015–2019, deaths due to drug overdoses increased substantially in frequency compared to the previous five-year period. Vessel policies can be enacted to address this emerging issue. Vessels can carry an opioid overdose reversal kit, and crewmembers can receive training on responding to drug overdoses and other medical emergencies.

Other Hazards



Onshore

During 2015–2019, two crewmembers died from traumatic injuries sustained onshore, contributing to 3% of fatalities on the East Coast. These onshore fatalities resulted from one crewmember falling off a dock and drowning while under the influence of alcohol, and one shore-based fisherman drowning while harvesting clams.



Diving

During 2015–2019, two crewmembers died from traumatic injuries sustained while dive harvesting lobster and snapper/grouper, contributing to 3% of fatalities on the East Coast.

Safety Solutions

Vessel Disasters

- **Take a marine safety class at least every five years.** Learning how to use basic lifesaving equipment like immersion suits, life rafts, EPIRBs*, and fire extinguishers improves chances of survival in an emergency.
- **Conduct monthly drills for abandon ship, fire, and flooding.** Drills reinforce the practical knowledge and skills learned in safety training.
- **Ensure watertight integrity of the vessel.** Inspect and maintain the hull and through-hull penetrations regularly. Maintain and test high water alarms and pumps before each trip. Check that doors and hatches are closed in rough seas.
- **Maintain proper watch.** Create fatigue management policies and use watch alarms to prevent groundings and collisions.
- **Take a vessel stability class and adhere to stability instructions.** Vessel stability training is beneficial for all crewmembers. Consult a naval architect periodically to review safe loading limits of the vessel. Always load vessels in compliance with their stability instructions.
- **Avoid crossing river bars during hazardous conditions.** If a bar crossing is unavoidable, it is important that all crewmembers don PFDs or immersion suits, and the Coast Guard should be contacted for assistance.

Falls Overboard

- **Wear a PFD on deck and in skiffs.** PFDs keep crewmembers afloat and give the crew time for rescue, even in cold water.
- **Use a man-overboard alarm system.** Unwitnessed falls overboard delay recovery time and reduce survival. A man-overboard alarm will alert others that a fall overboard occurred, assisting in rapid search and rescue.

- **Add effective recovery devices and re-boarding ladders.** A rescue sling or similar device is more effective than a life ring for bringing a crewmember back on the vessel. If you fish alone, use an engine kill switch and make a plan to re-board your vessel without help.
- **Conduct man-overboard drills monthly.** Practice man-overboard recovery procedures regularly to ensure all crewmembers are prepared to respond to a fall overboard.

Onboard Fatalities

- **Carry an opioid overdose reversal kit onboard.** Overdose reversal medicine is highly effective, inexpensive, and available without a prescription. Developing a substance-free policy on the vessel may also help reduce drug-and alcohol-related deaths.
- **Conduct hazard assessments on the vessel.** A hazard assessment helps identify potentially dangerous tasks and decreases the risk of injuries by correcting the hazards.
- **Take a Mental Health First Aid class.** Mental health first aid provides the skills needed to respond to mental health emergencies. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text 988 to speak with a trained crisis counselor.

Diving Fatalities

- **Be prepared for a dive emergency.** Complete dive training and certification. Carry a bailout bottle while diving. Dive with an experienced, alert tender who is trained in diving first aid.

Onshore Fatalities

- **Wear a PFD when working around water.** At-the-dock drownings typically occur when the individual is alone. Wearing a PFD improves survival by keeping you afloat.
- **Avoid excessive drinking.** Alcohol can impair balance and coordination, increasing the risk of a fall and impeding self-rescue.

*Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon

¹The data presented in this report come from the NIOSH Commercial Fishing Incident Database

NIOSH [2025]. Commercial Fishing Fatality Summary – East Coast Region 2015-2019. By Lucas D, Teske T, Kloczko D. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, DHHS (NIOSH) Publication No. 2025-114

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