

Canfisco vessel safety and maintenance manager Bob Hall speaks with WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer Bruce Logan on the docks.

Redefining the risk of drowning

By Sarah Ripplinger

Between 2007 and 2018, there were 15 work-related drowning deaths in the British Columbia commercial fishing industry. A personal flotation device or lifejacket is the best piece of equipment to safeguard workers against drowning, but you have to put it on.

We know that wearing a personal flotation device (PFD) or lifejacket can save lives, but why don't fishermen always wear them?

For Bob Hall, vessel safety and maintenance manager with the Jim Pattison Enterprises Canadian Fishing Company (Canfisco), it comes down to education.

"If you put the PFD on the boat and the crew doesn't understand what it's about, it will just sit there. You need to educate the skipper and the crew about why to wear it and what to do in an emergency."

Hall comes from a long line of fishermen. He started going out on boats as a child and began working as a commercial fisherman in the 1970s when "nobody wore PFDs." It wasn't until around 10 to 12 years ago,

he notes, that the tide started to shift on PFD use.

"Many people that I've known quite well are not here because they drowned. Those deaths are not necessary," asserts Hall.

A comprehensive approach

"Once I started to see the evidence that there are options that can help people stay safe at sea, or at least keep you alive until you get picked up, I became a real supporter," he says.

Canfisco implemented its safety program and an on-deck PFD policy around 2006. Today, Hall leads safety orientations with skippers and crews on the company's trawlers, seiners, and packers.

The orientations are designed to educate the crew and skippers about the safety features of the vessel — along with safety procedures, regulations, drills, and equipment — including PFDs and lifejackets. The program has evolved to fully apprise the crew of the safety features available, and drills are conducted for practice so they know what to expect in a real emergency.

Canfisco supplies its crews with inherently buoyant foam PFDs, and also offers for purchase at cost slightly less bulky auto-inflatable PFDs that the company designed with Mustang Waterlife Studio.

Eliminating the guesswork

Processes at Canfisco were recently strengthened by an amendment to the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation that came into effect on June 3, 2019. The amendment “takes out the guesswork of when to wear PFDs,” says Hall.

“Under the new Regulation, PFDs or lifejackets must be worn on the deck of a fishing vessel or on a vessel that has no deck, such as a skiff or punt”, says Bruce Logan, an occupational safety officer with WorkSafeBC. “Prior to June 3, crews working on fishing vessels were required to wear PFDs only ‘under conditions which involve a risk of drowning.’”

While some crews were wearing PFDs on deck long before the regulation change, Logan says that many others would say “I don’t have to wear a PFD. There’s no risk of drowning.”

But PFDs are meant to protect against the unexpected, and when there’s water involved there’s almost always a risk. The amendment to the Regulation was prompted by the tragic sinking of the fishing vessel *Caledonian* in 2015, which took the lives of three out of four crew members. A key reason why one crew member survived was the fact that he was wearing a PFD.

In his role with WorkSafeBC, Logan conducts safety inspections of vessels at sea and regularly sees potential hazards that could land a worker in the water. For example, he says, “crew members setting traps at the stern of crab or prawn vessels have become entangled in lines and pulled overboard.” Some, who were not wearing PFDs, did not survive.

“Incidents like these can have lasting and devastating consequences,” notes Logan.

A safety mindset

Overall, Canfisco has been seeing lasting and positive consequences of its safety program. The fishermen have been taking it to heart, even when they aren’t out on a boat for Canfisco.

“There was a private boat that caught fire ... and one of our regular crew members was on it and said that he survived because of the training he got from the Canadian Fishing Company,” says Hall.

The other indicator Hall uses to determine the success of the Canfisco safety program and PFD policy: “We haven’t lost anybody since 2008.” ☺

Gear tips

Safety tips for PFD and lifejacket use from Bruce Logan, occupational safety officer, WorkSafeBC.

- 1 Always read the manufacturer’s instructions for manual and auto-inflatable PFD’s and lifejackets. Become familiar with these devices and check them periodically for leaks.
- 2 Auto-inflatable PFDs and lifejackets have a hydrostatic inflator with a 5-year expiry date. You need to make sure these are not expired, or else they may not inflate when they are supposed to. Make sure that the status indicator button in the window is showing green. If red, replace the cartridge.
- 3 If using an inherently buoyant device such as a foam vest or floater jacket, make sure that there is retro-reflective material on it. Use a brightly coloured vest or jacket. PFDs in darker colours may not be easy to spot in the water in poor visibility.
- 4 When not worn, keep PFDs and lifejackets in a place where you can get to them quickly.

Learn more by visiting [worksafebc.com](https://www.worksafebc.com) and searching for “PFD.”



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