Coast Guard Encourages Vessel Checks Before Crab Season

Local News

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ASTORIA, Ore. — The Coast Guard is encouraging fishermen to conduct vessel stability checks on their boats after an incident with a fishing vessel near Wesport, Wash., Sunday. Coast Guard Station Grays Harbor responded to a distress call from the crew of the fishing vessel Lady Nancy stating they were taking on water and their crew of four had donned immersion suits. The crew of the vessel had departed port on its fifth trip for the season laden with 110 Dungeness crab pots on deck arranged in a typical pyramid stack. The weather was fairly benign, with 4-6 ft swells and a 15-20 kt wind from the southwest. While preparing to set their pots, a wave knocked some of the pots to the starboard side and caused the starboard rail of the vessel to become submerged. The crew responded quickly and correctly by calling the Coast Guard, donning immersion suits, and dumping their pots overboard to correct their stability issues. Coast Guard Station Grays Harbor escorted the vessel back to port and found no safety discrepancies, nor any sign of water intrusion after conducting a post-Search and Rescue boarding. The Lady Nancy’s crew’s actions in the face of the incident were appropriate. In October, the vessel received a Commercial Fishing Vessel Safety Exam decal from the Coast Guard, indicating that it complied with all safety regulations. The ship’s master and another member of the crew took a safety course in 2008, and the whole crew had conducted safety drills a week prior to their voyage.

"Fortunately, this is a well maintained vessel with a recent commercial fishing vessel safety exam and a trained crew who had participated in emergency drills and was prepared to respond properly to this sudden reduction in stability.” said Capt. Bruce Jones, Sector Columbia River Commander.The crab fleet along Oregon and Washington is mostly made up of vessels less than 79 feet in length. Vessels less than 79 feet typically do not have stability letters to indicate how many pots the vessel can handle. Operators of these smaller vessels often call upon past experience when loading pots. A vessel can change over time, experiencing what is referred to as ‘weight creep.’ This often occurs as fisheries change and equipment is added and vessels are modified. A vessel’s center of gravity can change as a result. What worked last year might not work this year.“Many of these vessels are operated by ‘feel’ and what has been done in the past,” said Mike Rudolph, a Coast Guard fishing vessel safety examiner. “There are several cases each year where we have a close call or, worse, lose a vessel and a life due to a shift in weight, overloading or some other stability issue."A rule of thumb is to make sure a vessel has at least six inches of freeboard. A vessel with less than six inches has significantly reduced reserve buoyancy. Reserve buoyancy keeps a vessel afloat when something bad happens such as taking a serious roll or taking water in the engine room or lazarette. Reserve buoyancy will bring a vessel back to equilibrium after such things happen. When a vessel has little or no reserve buoyancy there is no room for error.Additionally, the Coast Guard encourages operators to do a ‘roll period’ test. This test is done while at the dock by slacking the lines and getting the vessel to start rolling (stepping hard on one side is usually enough) to port and starboard. Start timing at the end of a roll. Let the vessel roll three times. Next, divide the result by 3 and the resulting number is the ‘roll period’ for the vessel. This should be done when a vessel is new to an operator, then again at the beginning of each season and in varying loaded configurations. This

information ensures operators know when the characteristics of their vessels change so that further evaluation can be conducted before something bad happens.“We want all fishermen to come home safely from every voyage,” said Curt Farrell, Commercial Fishing Vessel Safety Coordinator at Marine Safety Unit Portland, Ore.Vessel operators can get their dockside Fishing Vessel Safety Examination Decal by calling Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit Portland at (503) 240-9337.To get and print a custom checklist for a vessel in order to prepare for an exam go to www.uscg.mil/d13/cfvs and select the ‘checklist generator’ link.