



Ecosystem Health & Public Safety

Sea Grant introduces vessel safety training program to Oregon fishermen

OF ALL THE PEOPLE WHO'VE passed through Oregon Sea Grant's nationally acclaimed vessel safety program, one stands out in Chief Warrant Officer Scott Clendenin's memory.

"He couldn't read, and the program found a tutor to help him get through the course material," recalls Clendenin, commander of the U.S. Coast Guard station at Yaquina Bay on the Oregon coast. "Two weeks later, his boat got in trouble and started going down. Because of the class, and the extra help he got, he knew how to operate his new pump and saved his boat."

Commercial fishing is one of the nation's most dangerous occupations. In the early 1990s, according to a report by the National Transportation Research Council, the Pacific Northwest and Alaska fisheries had the highest rate of vessel loss and fatalities in the United States. A U.S. Coast Guard study concluded that up to 80 percent of commercial fishing vessel accidents are caused by human error.

Since its inception, Oregon Sea Grant has been working to reduce those human errors and make commercial fishing a safer occupation.

Early efforts in the 1970s focused on workshops and other educational programs designed to teach fishermen about safety procedures and equipment, including exposure suits; many



Fishermen wear exposure suits during a nighttime, Sea Grant-sponsored training.

credit Sea Grant with introducing the suits to the Oregon commercial fishing fleet, and persuading fishermen that they are worth the investment.

In the early 1990s, when Congress strengthened vessel safety requirements, Extension Sea Grant ramped up its safety training program to focus more directly on reducing accidents, injuries, and deaths in the commercial fleet.

The Fishing Vessel Safety Act of 1991 requires, among other things, that crews on commercial fishing vessels participate in monthly safety drills on their vessels. The drills must be conducted by someone who has

earned certification through a Coast Guard-approved vessel safety course.

When the law was passed, Oregon Sea Grant was already offering the only Coast Guard-approved training in the nation, developed in collaboration with Clatsop Community College in Astoria. Extension Sea Grant agent Ginny Goblirsch—a fisherman's wife—helped community college faculty develop the curriculum and create a coast-long network of community colleges where vessel safety training would be offered convenient to major ports (Clatsop Community College in Astoria; Oregon Coast

Community College in Newport; and Southwest Oregon Community College in Coos Bay).

The curriculum won Coast Guard approval, and Goblirsch organized sessions to train an initial pool of certified vessel safety instructors—most of them from the commercial fishing industry—who went on to train others in courses organized through the community college network, at times and places convenient to the fleets and their schedules.

By 1998, Sea Grant had trained more than 800 commercial fishermen using a combination of classroom sessions and hands-on drills.

In its first formal evaluation, conducted two years into the training program, Sea Grant found that, of 80 survey respondents, 11 percent reported that they had already put their training to work in dangerous, real-life situations.

Sea Grant has expanded its efforts beyond the commercial fishing fleet, offering the nation's first Coast Guard-approved safety training for charter boat skippers in Depoe Bay. After the class, skippers there instituted a regular training program for their own deckhands, based on the Sea Grant curriculum.

Similar courses have been offered to staff of the Oregon State Police, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the Oregon Coast Aquarium, all of whom

spend time on fishing vessels as part of their job. Those programs continue to be in demand among agency personnel.

most active in the country in terms of safety training.

The fleet's increased focus on safety, meanwhile, led the Coast

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"One of the things she did right was to bring in instructors who really understood the fishing industry," Thompson said. "If these had been a bunch of outsiders who just came in to lay down the law, it would have fallen flat. But she did it right, and now the fleet is just hands above where we used to be in terms of safety consciousness."

The Oregon program's success has inspired other states, including neighboring Washington, to adapt the Sea Grant model for use in their own fisheries. "This is a role-model program—probably the best in the country," said the Coast Guard's Scott Clendenin. "It helped train people in northern California and Washington, too, and this region continues to be the

Guard to add a rescue helicopter base to the central Oregon Coast, something fishermen had sought for years. Over time, that decision led to a \$1 million Federal Aviation Administration Grant to install an Instrument Landing System at Newport's small airport, allowing the Coast Guard to expand its foul-weather rescue operations and make it safer for all aircraft that use the airport.

Goblirsch's vessel safety work has won her recognition in her community—she was named 1996 Woman of the Year by the Newport Business and Professional Women, for instance—and nationally, where she has served since 1998 on the Coast Guard's National Commercial Fishing Industry Vessel Advisory Committee, which advises the service on all aspects of vessel safety.