



South African Maritime Safety Authority

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Lessons learnt from casualties: Freeing Ports and Safe Access

TO ALL SHIP OPERATORS, MASTERS, SHIPS' AGENTS AND PRINCIPAL OFFICERS

Summary

This marine notice highlights the following:

1. The dangers of blocked freeing ports and loose gear on deck.
2. The importance of safe access on decks of <25GT fishing vessels

1. Casualty # 1 – Freeing ports and stowage of loose gear on deck

1.1. Background:

A number of lives were lost in a casualty where a contributory factor may have been that the drainage of water from the deck was restricted after the freeing ports became obstructed.

The vessel in question was a side trawler with the working deck open to starboard, but protected on the port side by a raised gunwale that merged with the whaleback/foc'sle deck.

The vessel rolled to port but did not recover, having developed an excessive list to port. This was subsequent to a swell coming over the main deck from starboard. With a second swell coming onboard, the port main deck passageway was submerged to a depth of around 2 meters.

The vessel righted itself subsequent to the crew having abandoned the vessel. On inspection of the vessel, numerous items of loose deck gear were found to be lying in the areas around the freeing ports. A significant number of fish trays contributed to obstructing the freeing ports.

1.2. Dangers related to obstruction of freeing ports:

The free surface effect of water trapped on deck dramatically affects the stability of any vessel. Freeing ports are designed to allow water to drain effectively and so reduce free surface moments.

The casualty in question likely had closer to one hundred tons of water on deck. Any restriction in the drainage flow from the freeing ports would have delayed the vessel's return to upright.

With such a large quantity of water on the main deck, any unsecured gear is likely to have been picked up and carried by the flow of the water, in this case towards the freeing ports.

1.3. Summary:

It is important to bear in mind that loose gear improperly stowed on deck may potentially restrict the ability of the freeing ports to clear water from the deck.

In addition those onboard should be fully aware of the statutory requirement to keep freeing ports in good order and as approved by the Authority, as contained in both the Code of Safe Working Practices for Fishing Vessels and the Construction Regulations of 1968.

2. Casualty # 2, No safe access resulting in loss of a man overboard.

2.1. Background

A small <25 GT fishing vessel was proceeding to fishing grounds. Her deck was loaded with crayfish traps. This meant that the only access between forward on aft was by walking on top of the bulwark as deck access was obstructed by the traps.

A seafarer is presumed to have lost his life after falling overboard. Although an extensive search operation was conducted, the seafarer was never found.

2.2. Statutory Requirements:

The Merchant Shipping (National Small Vessel Safety) Regulations 2007, as amended, are explicit in the requirement that the skipper ensures that the vessel is operated in a safe manner.

Regulation 8((2) states;

*No person may operate a vessel in a careless manner, **without reasonable consideration for other persons or without due care and attention, taking into account**—*

- (a) *the weather;*
- (b) *visibility;*
- (c) *the presence of persons or vessels in the body of water, including concentrations of persons and vessels in the immediate vicinity of the vessel;*
- (d) *the speed and maneuverability of the vessel, with special reference to stopping distance and turning capability in the prevailing conditions;*
- (e) *light conditions, including the presence of background light from shore lights or from backscatter of the vessel's own lights;*
- (f) *water conditions, currents and the proximity of navigational hazards; **and***
- (g) **any other hazards that could adversely affect the safety of persons or property.**

In addition, the Merchant Shipping (National Small Vessel Safety) Regulations 2007, as amended are quite clear in the intention that adequate protection against falling overboard be in place.

The applicable part of Annexure 1, regulation 3 states;

Guard rails etc.

(1) *Subject to subitems (2) and (3)—*

(a) *every power-driven vessel which goes to sea and has an open deck on which persons can walk must be provided with efficient guard rails, or an equivalent arrangement, around the outboard edge of the deck to a height of at least—*

(i) *600 millimetres*

(ii) *450 millimetres above the deck on vessels less than nine metres in overall length:*

(3) *Power-driven vessels constructed so that the cabin-top extends nearly to the vessel's side, with a crew-only access forward, are exempt from subitem (1) if provided with a substantial, **secure handrail on each side of the cabin and with a toe rail** of at least 50 millimetres in height along the outer edge of the deck.*

2.3. Summary

Skippers are reminded that safe access around the vessel is a statutory requirement. Stowing Cray Fish traps or other gear in a manner that prevents safe access is a contravention of the Merchant Shipping (National Small Vessel Safety) Regulations 2007

Failing to ensure the safety of those onboard and/or failing to maintain the vessel in an 'as built' state (in this instance in terms of both safe access, secure handrails and toe rail) are serious offences that are likely to result in legal action on the part of the Authority.

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Issued by and obtainable from:
The South African Maritime Safety Authority
146 Lunnon Road
Hillcrest Pretoria

P O Box 13186
Hatfield 0028
South Africa

Tel.: +27 12 366 2600

Fax: +27 12 366 2601

E-mail: marinenotices@samsa.org.za

Web Site : www.samsa.org.za