

South African Maritime Safety Authority



Marine Notice No. 7 of 2004

Shortcomings in safety culture on board South African fishing vessels

TO ALL PRINCIPAL OFFICERS AND OWNERS, OPERATORS, MANAGERS AND SKIPPERS OF FISHING VESSELS

Summary

This Marine Notice advises the fishing industry of shortcomings identified in the safe operation of fishing vessels.

The Merchant Shipping Act, 1951, requires the owner and skipper of a fishing vessel to maintain the vessel in a seaworthy condition and to perform various safety exercises (e.g. boat and fire drills) on a regular basis. An analysis of casualties in the industry spanning the last 6 years shows that a number of owners and skippers fail to comply with these obligations.

As part of its campaign to inculcate a safety culture in the fishing industry, SAMSA identified the need to better understand how fishing vessels are operated at sea. This was done using the expertise of Capricorn Fisheries Monitoring (CFM) to gather relevant operational information; CFM are contracted to Marine & Coastal Management to provide observers on board fishing vessels. CFM observers completed a basic safety checklist based on their on board observations. Although not a definitive investigation into safety related problems in the industry, an analysis of 238 checklists confirms a lack of compliance in certain areas.

The following table shows the analysis with commentary on the items shown in the table.

	YES	NO	%
Was there a watchkeeping officer on the bridge while steaming	231	7	97
Was a visual and radio watch kept at all times	230	8	97
Were there signs of drug or alcohol abuse on board	21	217	91
Were safety posters displayed	217	21	91
Were the Muster lists displayed	215	23	90
Was the accommodation ventilation adequate	214	24	90
Were liferafts correctly secured with hydrostatics and not lashed down	214	24	90
Were there any accidents to the crew	29	209	88
Was access to vessel safe	193	45	81
Was the Local General Safety Certificate displayed and valid	192	46	80
Was non-biodegradable garbage retained on board	188	50	79
Did the crew wear safety gear while working on deck	161	77	68
Did you sign articles or submit your details for the crew list	152	86	64
Were you instructed what to do if the general alarm was sounded	129	109	54
Did anybody enquire if you had the necessary safety gear to go on deck	121	117	51
Were you instructed what to do if the vessel had to be abandoned	119	119	50
Did anybody enquire and check that you knew how to don a lifejacket correctly	115	123	48
Were you shown where your lifejacket was stowed	113	125	47
Were the crew exercised in boat drills	91	147	38
Were the crew exercised in fire drills	73	165	31

Commentary

1. Safe Access

81 % of vessels had safe access. At present only vessels of 30 metres or longer have to provide a gangway. With the promulgation of amendments to the Maritime Occupational Safety Regulations, 1994, all vessels will be required to provide safe access. A mixture of a lack of safe access and drugs and alcohol are a recipe for an accident.

2. Articles and crew lists

64% of vessels completed either articles or crew lists. Regardless of the size of the vessel some form of crew list has to be completed prior to sailing. This is a legal requirement. It is vital to the search and rescue organizations that they know how many persons to look for in the event of an incident. It also reduces the time taken to inform next of kin and to arrange assistance to families.

3. Safety Posters

91% of vessels display safety posters. A series of posters in the form of humorous cartoons with a safety message have been produced by SAMSA. These posters are obtainable free of charge from SAMSA.

4. Instructions to new persons on board

54% of observers were instructed what to do if the general alarm was sounded.

50% of observers were instructed what to do if the vessel had to be abandoned.

47% of observers were shown where their lifejackets were stowed.

48% of observers were asked if they knew how to don a lifejacket.

51% of observers were asked whether they had the necessary personal safety equipment to go on deck.

The assumption made by skippers that observers, or any other newly appointed persons, will know where to go, and what to do, in the event of an emergency is alarming. There is no time while an emergency situation is unfolding to tell people what to do, or how to don a lifejacket, assuming they know where it is.

While all observers have undertaken approved safety training, they will not know the location of safety equipment and muster points and duties on board different vessels. This also true of any supernumary who may be on board.

Amendments to the Merchant Shipping (Small Vessel Safety) Regulations, 2002, require a safety briefing prior to every departure, which will cover the above cases.

5. Fire and boat drills

Fire drills were held on 31%, and boat drills on 38%, of trips. It is recognized that observers are only on board for short periods, which could fall outside the 30 day mandatory drill interval. Nevertheless, it is considered good safety practice to hold drills within 24 hours of departure from port, especially when new crew have joined. There is no substitute for training: crew should be trained in advance, as basics cannot be taught as an emergency evolves.

6. Crew safety gear

68% of crew were found to wear safety equipment while working on deck. The major cause of death in the industry is drowning. On larger vessels this often occurs when crew are knocked overboard, invariable when shooting or hauling fishing gear. It is a requirement that flotation aids and helmets are worn on deck while fishing gear is being worked.

On smaller vessels drowning is often the result of capsizing or swamping. Amendments to the Merchant Shipping (Small Vessel Safety) Regulations, 2002, require a flotation aid to be worn in the following circumstances:

- when operating within 1 nautical mile from shore;
- when working on deck at night;
- when performing any task that involves the risk of being knocked overboard.

Skippers and safety officers should ensure that the wearing of safety gear is rigidly enforced.

7. Drugs and alcohol

On 9% of trips drug and alcohol abuse was noted. Accidents involving drugs and alcohol usually occur shortly after departure. The use of illicit drugs and unauthorised alcohol on board is illegal. Skippers should not sign on crew who appear to be under the influence. A crew member who is under the influence cannot appreciate the dangers involved and should not be permitted to work. Apart from endangering him or herself, such a crew member can endanger others. Where a crew member admits that he or she may have a problem and wants to address it, the SAMSA Welfare Officer can facilitate contact with the various institutions that can assist.

8. Garbage

79% of vessels retain non-biodegradable garbage on board. It is a legal requirement not to dump this garbage in the sea; it should be returned to port. It is difficult to understand why fishermen pollute the environment that provides their living.

9. Liferafts

10% of liferafts have additional lashings. While there may be occasions during extremely bad weather when additional lashings are needed, these should be removed as soon as possible after the weather has passed. Where additional lashings are used, they should be of a kind that can be released quickly (whether by cutting or otherwise). It is recommended that all liferafts be fitted with hydrostatic releases.

10. Bridge watchkeeping

On 3% of trips there were occasions when no officer was keeping the watch while the vessel was steaming; also, there were occasions when no radio watch was kept. Apart from being a basic tenet of good seamanship, it is a legal requirement that a suitably qualified officer keeps the watch. This also applies to keeping a radio watch on the distress frequencies.

11. Bridge visibility

10% of vessels did not have visibility extending over an arc of at least 180° from side to side forward of the wheelhouse. These vessels usually have bins or traps stored on the whaleback. Apart from being a detainable deficiency, it is the prime ingredient for a collision.

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Issued by and obtainable from:
The South African Maritime Safety Authority
Block E, Hatfield Gardens
333 Grosvenor Street
Hatfield, Pretoria

P O Box 13186
Hatfield 0028

tel: +27 12 342 3049
fax: +27 12 342 3160
E-mail: samsa@samsa.org.za