



TSB Recommendation M23-08

Hazard identification in fisheries resource management decisions

The Transportation Safety Board of Canada recommends that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans ensure that policies, procedures, and practices include comprehensive identification of hazards and assessment of associated risks to fish harvesters when fisheries resource management decisions are being made and integrate independent safety expertise into these processes.

Marine transportation safety investigation report	M21A0065
Date the recommendation was issued	07 December 2023
Date of the latest response	March 2026
Date of the latest assessment	March 2026
Rating of the latest response	Satisfactory Intent
File status	Active

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Summary of the occurrence

On 01 April 2021, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) assessed the weather conditions and notified fish harvesters that the snow crab fishery in area 12 of the Gulf of St. Lawrence would open at 0001 on 03 April 2021. At the time of the notification, there was ice in Richibucto Harbour, New Brunswick, and an excavator was needed to break ice at the wharf to put the *Tyhawk* in the water.

On 02 April at 0435, the master and 4 crew members sailed the 13.61 m open fishing vessel *Tyhawk* from Richibucto, New Brunswick, to Chéticamp, Nova Scotia, for the season. They were joined in Chéticamp by 4 additional crew members, who had driven from Richibucto.

On 03 April, starting at approximately 0240, the *Tyhawk* made 2 voyages from Chéticamp to the fishing grounds. On the first voyage, with the master and all 8 crew members on board, they set about 75 crab traps. During this voyage, ice was accumulating on the vessel. On the second voyage, the master and 4 crew members departed to set about 50 more crab traps.

On the trip to the fishing grounds, the master and 3 crew members napped in the accommodation space while another crew member stood watch. The winds had increased to 20 to 25 knots with 1 to 2 m seas. Waves were hitting the starboard side, and rain and freezing rain were falling. A second crew member came to the wheelhouse where he noticed an accumulation of water in the bilge. He called the master and the other crew members, and the bilge pumps were started. Shortly afterwards, a crew member went under the removable deck to get some of the gear and found water on the main deck. He alerted the other crew members, and the wash-down pump configuration was changed to dewater the bilge. At this time, the weather seemed to increase in severity and the vessel's movements became more severe. Following a significant heel to starboard, the vessel's main deck submerged, allowing water in addition to that already on deck to enter the *Tyhawk*.

Crew members could not reach the lifejackets and immersion suits stowed in the accommodation space or launch the life raft, which had slid under the removable deck. Shortly afterward, the *Tyhawk* capsized and the master and crew members climbed on to the overturned hull. One crew member called 911. The automatic emergency position-indicating radio beacon (EPIRB) floated free and at 1750, the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre Halifax received notice of an EPIRB signal from the *Tyhawk*.

As the overturned *Tyhawk* sank lower in the water, wave action repeatedly swept the master and 1 crew member clear of the hull and into the water. Eventually, the master and this crew member remained in the water. The fishing vessel *Northumberland Spray* arrived on scene and rescued the 4 *Tyhawk* crew members, but the master could not be located. The *Northumberland Spray* returned to Chéticamp and the 4 crew members received medical assistance. One crew member was pronounced dead. The search for the master continued through the night and all the next day. At 1955 on 04 April 2021, the case was turned over to the RCMP as a missing persons case.

The Board concluded its investigation and released report M21A0065 on 22 November 2023.

Rationale for the recommendation

In this occurrence, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) moved the opening date for the snow crab fishery forward by almost 3 weeks from previous years. This decision was based on the advice of a subcommittee composed of representatives from industry and government. DFO and the subcommittee members considered the selection of the opening date and time for the 2021 snow crab fishery as routine. Consequently, hazards posed by changing the date, which would increase the likelihood of colder water, ice, and freezing rain, or by opening the fishery at midnight, which would increase the risk of fatigue, were not identified and assessed for safety implications.

Fisheries resource management (FRM) decisions are complex, balancing economic, conservation, and safety concerns and their interactions and cumulative effects. In 2021, the season-opening decision was influenced by many FRM measures and policies. All commercial

fishing vessels in Canada, the number of which is estimated at 18 000 to 29 000 vessels,¹ are subject to FRM measures that influence the actions and behaviours of fish harvesters.²

The TSB has previously investigated occurrences in which FRM measures were implemented and fish harvester safety was affected. For example, in September 2018, 2 people died when the fishing vessel *Kyla Ann* capsized near North Cape, Prince Edward Island, while following a DFO-defined corridor instead of the established navigational route.³ In 2016, 2 people died and 2 others were presumed drowned after the crew of the *Pop's Pride* sailed in adverse sea conditions in order to ensure the FRM measures were met.⁴ The TSB's Safety Issues Investigation into Fishing Safety in Canada, published in 2012, identified FRM as 1 of the 10 significant safety issues associated with fishing accidents. The report indicated that "meeting resource management measures can contribute to risk-taking" and expressed "concern that the safety risks associated with fisheries management measures are not adequately identified and addressed."⁵

FRM measures can have positive consequences for safety, whether they were implemented for that reason or not. For example, in the British Columbia and Quebec regions, some fisheries are restricted to daylight hours.

Complex decisions, such as those concerning FRM, need to consider all relevant areas and interactions and must be supported by a comprehensive, methodical risk assessment. The quality of a risk assessment depends on the robustness of hazard identification. To identify as many hazards as possible, all relevant information must be considered by experts in their fields, including independent safety experts who are not affected by the decisions.

When FRM measures and decisions do not consider the interactions between economic, conservation, and safety factors, including their cumulative effects, then decisions may be made for new and complex situations without adequate identification of safety hazards, increasing safety risks for fish harvesters.

Therefore, the Board recommended that

the Department of Fisheries and Oceans ensure that policies, procedures, and practices include comprehensive identification of hazards and assessment of

¹ On 31 March 2023, TC's records listed 18 365 vessels actively registered with TC as fishing vessels. Vessel registration may be suspended for various reasons while a vessel continues fishing. If suspended vessels are included, the number of vessels registered with TC as a fishing vessel was 25 410. A few thousand more fishing vessels receive commercial fishing licences but may not have registered with TC. See TSB Marine transportation recommendation M22-01 for background and updates.

² TSB Marine Investigation Report M09Z0001, Safety Issues Investigation into Fishing Safety in Canada.

³ TSB Marine Transportation Safety Investigation M18A0303. The vessel capsized when it was following DFO licence requirements to use a defined travel corridor instead of using the safest established navigational route. The travel corridor was defined as part of fisheries resource management enforcement measures.

⁴ TSB Marine Investigation Report M16A0327.

⁵ TSB Marine Investigation Report M09Z0001, Safety Issues Investigation into Fishing Safety in Canada.

associated risks to fish harvesters when fisheries resource management decisions are being made and integrate independent safety expertise into these processes.

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Previous responses and assessments

February 2024: response from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans

The Department is in the process of analyzing and exploring options to address this recommendation with the aim to incorporate further safety aspects into processes beginning in 2024, as appropriate. One area in particular we are giving attention to is the process of fishery openings and how to further identify hazards and associated risks, and where we may be able to integrate independent safety expertise. We will also explore areas around other resource management decisions where adjustments could be made to minimize risks to harvesters.

While analysis and procedural development and implementation may take time, we are eager to support reducing risk on the water without adding undue cost or complexity to commercial fishers. As such, the Department recently developed and implemented a communication plan which provides safety reminders and tips to fish harvesters through social media. This initiative is a direct result of industry feedback around increasing communication and education. In addition, DFO continues to work with all our partners, especially Transport Canada, to promote and advance safety at sea.

May 2024: TSB assessment of the response (Unable to Assess)

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) indicates that it is currently assessing how to best address this recommendation. In particular, the department is looking at the process for determining when to open fisheries and where independent safety expertise could be incorporated. Additionally, it is exploring areas around other resource management decisions where risk could be minimized. In the meantime, DFO will provide safety reminders and tips for fish harvesters on social media through its newly implemented communication plan, as well as continue its collaborative work with other departments, such as Transport Canada, to advance safety at sea.

The Board takes note that DFO has acknowledged the recommendation and is considering how best to address it. The Board is encouraged that DFO is taking a more active role in promoting safety at sea for fish harvesters. However, DFO has not yet presented a plan for how it will address the scope of the recommendation. Therefore, the Board is **unable to assess** DFO's response to Recommendation M23-08.

Latest response and assessment

March 2026: response from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans

The Department agrees with the TSB's recommendation that hazard identification should be included in resource management decisions. DFO, however, would like to highlight the following considerations already in place that contribute to a comprehensive identification of hazards prior to taking resource management decisions.

- Though some fisheries are managed nationally, most are managed regionally, with the decision to open or to delay the opening of a fishery being made by the Regional Director General for that specific region. A fishery is only opened once DFO deems all safety considerations are met and justify it, and by only utilizing the most recent information available that supports a safe opening of the fishery.
- In particular, prior to making a decision on opening a fishery: ice conditions, search and rescue readiness, navigation buoys, weather, harbour dredging, tide and current information, amongst others, are considered. These factors are specific to each regions, the time of year and differ by fishery and fishing area.
- Dates for fishery openings/closings are communicated by variation orders, published on the DFO website, e-mailed to relevant fishery advisory committee representatives and communicated via Fishery Notices as well as broadcasted on radio.
 - A variation order is a standard fisheries management tool and legal instrument to modify, on a temporary or seasonal basis, the regulations governing fishing activities. Under the *Fisheries Act*, variation orders allow for rapid adjustments to fishing operations and is fundamental to safety in fisheries.
- Fishery Advisory Committees are advisory bodies for specific fisheries that are comprised of relevant stakeholders including industry, other government organizations and Indigenous partners. The stakeholders discuss fisheries related issues such as safety concerns so they can be best informed on the risks of fishing.
 - In Pacific Region, representatives from the harbour authority and BC Ferries added language to fishery notices to be mindful around vessel traffic.
 - In Maritimes Region, Safety at Sea is a common agenda item under its Standard Operating Procedures for fisheries resource management. This is where harvesters and government discuss perspectives and identify potential hazards for the upcoming fishery season. Also, some fisheries have different management regimes, such as quota based systems that support safer operations by enabling longer fishing time to catch the allocated quota.

DFO has increased Transport Canada (TC) participation in Fishery Advisory Committees, especially in Atlantic Canada and Québec prior to fishery openings. TC marine safety inspectors have made presentations on the importance of vessel stability, registration and safety. TC has acknowledged this increased participation on these committees and is pleased with the results. They are addressing concerns raised, especially concerning vessel stability.

DFO and TC have also jointly prepared communication and outreach materials focusing on Safety at Sea that can be distributed to harvesters for snow crab and lobster fisheries prior to opening dates, with a focus on vessel stability, highlighting the importance on the safe loading of traps and carrying capacity. Another example of a new practice that has been adopted can be found in the Gulf Region where the decision was made not to open fisheries at midnight, but to wait until first light or early morning. Efforts are also made to open all the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence crab fisheries at the same time to help facilitate search and rescue, and air support.

Safety at Sea aspects were already present in some regional Integrated Fisheries Management Plans (IFMPs). Either in standalone sections or integrated throughout the IFMP, additional information dedicated to hazard identification, mitigation and fishing vessel safety are made available to fishers. However, changes are being made to better inform fisher about Safety at Sea.

- The Newfoundland and Labrador Region has updated its Safety at Sea section in its IFMPs with input from TC. This updated section will be included in the IFMPs for all fisheries in that region. The section touches on responsibilities, vessel registration, vessel condition, stability, emergency preparedness, safety equipment and weather. Safety at Sea will also have a standalone web page which is to be accessed by harvesters through a link in the Conservation Harvesting Plan.

IFMPs are already being utilized to communicate Safety at Sea issues, but there is currently no national standard across regions where Safety at Sea has a dedicated and standalone section. A new IFMP template is being designed to have a dedicated and exclusive Safety at Sea section that will be uniform across all regions. The idea is to bring a consistency across regions to highlight the importance of Safety at Sea in fisheries resource management decision making. It will also reserve a specific section to further identify hazards associated with harvesting as it differs depending on the stock being harvested. Work is underway, but there is no timeline as it is ongoing.

DFO will also continue to include safety at sea, best practices, identification of hazards and mitigations into fisheries resource management decision-making. Decisions around extensions, date changes due to weather or other factors will be made in consultation with industry and other partners where deemed appropriate.

DFO does not plan to have any actions to be voluntary in nature. The actions that have and will be implemented will be embedded in decision-making processes, such as the IFMPs. DFO does actively participate in championing Safety at Sea initiatives that are currently ongoing either through industry or other organizations. It works with partners, like the Professional Fish Harvesters Certification Board in Newfoundland and Labrador, on the importance of Personal Locator Beacons (PLB) through its PLB campaign. DFO also highlights TC's Small Vessel Compliance Program, a voluntary program that helps small fishing vessel owners in compliance with existing TC regulations.

Safety at sea is a shared responsibility. Working together to avoid Safety at Sea risks and prepare for the unexpected saves lives. DFO provides access to pertinent information on Safety at Sea through its dedicated Safety at Sea website, notices to fish harvesters and through its multiple advisory committees for fisheries.

Vessel owners are responsible for safe operation of their vessel and safety of crew and DFO has provided a variety of resources, including best practices, and updates and discussions with industry happen on a regular basis, so vessel owners can make decisions regarding safety and risk tolerance as a safety and business decision.

March 2026: TSB assessment of the response (Satisfactory Intent)

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) has described a number of practices, already in place, that contribute to a comprehensive identification of hazards before taking resource management decisions. DFO has also invited increased participation from Transport Canada (TC) in fishery advisory committees, which provides independent safety expertise and facilitates the sharing of safety information. Joint communications from DFO and TC to the fishing industry is a new measure that may increase awareness of safety information. Integration of vessel safety information into regional integrated fisheries management plans (IFMPs) is being undertaken, with a plan to develop a national template to ensure that information about hazards is included in the decision-making process. Finally, DFO has indicated that decisions around extensions, date changes due to weather or other factors will be made in consultation with industry and other partners where deemed appropriate.

The Board notes that DFO's response describes a combination of important initiatives, including collaborating with TC in support of a more government-wide approach to vessel safety. Embedding vessel safety in the decision-making process will ensure that risks to fish harvesters are considered when resource management decisions are being made. Outreach initiatives and working with partners on raising awareness of safety tools, such as personal locator beacons will continue to raise awareness of the shared responsibility for safety at sea.

The Board looks forward to reviewing DFO's national template for IFMPs and its continued work to embed vessel safety considerations and independent safety expertise in fisheries resource management decisions across its regions.

Therefore, the Board considers DFO's response to show **Satisfactory Intent**.

File status

The TSB will monitor the actions taken by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

This deficiency file is **Active**.