

Though it is a dangerous job, commercial fisherman love it

The annual average for fishing fatalities in Alaska is at about 17.

By Peggy Andersen
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

SEATTLE — Commercial fishermen know theirs is one of the most dangerous professions, especially in the winter off Alaska — but they go to sea anyway.

"It's in the blood," Steve Custodio said with a shrug at Fisherman's Terminal in Salmon Bay before heading out to fish for black cod in the Bering Sea. "You cuss yourself out but you keep going back."

"There's an excitement that you can't understand till you're out there," said David W. Rundall, whose son David, 34, was skipper of the fishing boat Arctic Rose.

The 92-foot vessel vanished in the Bering Sea off Alaska on April 2.

Of 15 people on board, Rundall's son is the only one whose body was recovered.

He had pulled on his survival suit, but it wasn't fully zipped against water that is around 34 degrees this time of year.

"I think people either fall in love with it or they're scared to death and never want to set foot in one of those boats again," said the senior Rundall, of West Seattle.

"People will tell you hair-raising stories and they'll be smiling," he said.

His son spared the family his stories, "but I heard from his friends. The close calls and things."

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, commercial fishermen are 30 times more likely to die on the job than the average American worker.

Although the annual average for fishing fatalities in Alaska is around 17 — down from

a high of 33 in 1992 — the sinking of the Arctic Rose earlier this month has already brought this year's total to 17, said Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Ernie Morton, a marine safety official in Juneau, Alaska.

"A lot of people come up here ... to test themselves against the sea. There is always going to be an element of danger," he said about the job.

Winter on the Bering Sea can produce 50-foot seas, 100-knot wind and wind chill of 40 below zero. Waves crashing on deck can fill a boat or short out vital electrical gear.

Ice forming on a boat's superstructure and gear can make ships so top-heavy they capsize. And the weather can combine with mechanical problems, such as failed bilge pumps.

"One little failing is not going to cause a boat to sink, but it could cause a cascade of failures that could ultimately be catastrophic," said Jonathan Parrott, director of engineering for Jensen Maritime, a Seattle marine engineering company.

"If a little leak springs up in the hull, if your bilge pumps are working, it's no big deal — but if they're not, then heaven help you."

In addition to all that, fishermen can be maimed or killed by big hooks, heavy deck gear or the equipment used to process the catch.

"It's relentless," said Bernie Fernandez, 42, of Bellingham, who was paying his respects to the crew of the Arctic Rose at the Fishermen's Memorial, a wall bearing the names of the hundreds of Seattle fishermen lost at sea since 1900.

Fernandez fished in the 1980s and '90s out of Petersburg, Alaska, until his family had enough.

"When you went out on the Bering Sea, you knew you were among the elite," he said. "You had to be the best or you didn't come home."



Fisherman Marcos Carmona lights three candles at the foot of the Fisherman's Memorial at Fisherman's Terminal in honor of his friends aboard the missing vessel, Arctic Rose.

The cause of the Arctic Rose's sinking isn't known. Its automatic emergency locator beacon began broadcasting at 3:30 a.m., when the weather was relatively calm for the Bering Sea: 6- to 8-foot seas and wind blowing at 25 knots.

"It had to have happened very quickly," and the crew members likely were asleep below decks, the elder Rundall said.

Rescuers found David Rundall, a few empty survival suits, an empty raft and an oil sheen. Another body was spotted but lost.

"This was his last trip," the father said. "Being away from his family — it got to be too much for him. ... His wife found him a tanker job, traveling on a big safe ship."

Oversight of the industry is slim.

Fishing vessels under 5,000 tons "are what we call uninspected vessels," Morton said. The industry is exempt from minimum requirements and gets only spotty attention from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Standards set by the Fishing Vessel Safety Act of 1991 only apply to boats built since then, but "we don't see many of those," Mor-

ton said about those fishing boats. "We get a lot of exemption requests," he said, which sometimes come with political pressure.

Most vessels submit to voluntary dockside inspections for safety gear and training. The Coast Guard wants such inspections to be mandatory.

"No amount of regulation can eliminate the risk," said Rep. Brian Baird, D-Wash., who worries about the adequacy of the Coast Guard budget this year, especially with recent fuel price increases.

People in the industry said the owner of the Arctic Rose, Dave Olney of Arctic Sole Seafoods, treated his crews well and worked in the off season to maintain the company's two boats, the Arctic Rose and its sister ship, the Alaskan Rose.

His brother, Mike, was engineer on the Arctic Rose when it vanished, and Dave Olney himself skipped the vessel until three weeks ago.

"I figure if the owner's going out there, they've got to have confidence in the boat," the elder Rundall said.

Congress to receive full budget

By Martin Crutsinger
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON, D.C. — With President Bush preparing to release the point-by-point details of how his \$1.96 trillion budget would rein in government spending, Vice President Dick Cheney said yesterday that Bush will not hesitate to veto spending bills he considers that are too excessive.

Democrats, still celebrating an initial victory in trimming Bush's tax cut, awaited today's release of the full budget so they could see which government programs were targeted for some deep reductions.

They said opposition to those proposed cuts will help as they seek to hold the line on the administration's \$1.6 trillion, 10-year tax cut.

In Bush's first major defeat, the Senate last week voted to reduce the tax cut by one-quarter, to \$1.2 trillion, an action that must now be reconciled with a House resolution endorsing the president's original request.

"When people see the budget, they're going to say, 'Oh, my God, I wanted a tax cut, but I didn't know what you were going to do to health care and to Medicare and national defense,'" Sen. John Breaux, D-La., said on ABC's *This Week*.

Cheney defended the administration's budget decisions, arguing that spending has gotten out of control since 1998 when the first of a series of budget surpluses began.

"This president is eager to veto appropriations that come in over budget," Cheney said.

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