

Perspectives from Commercial Maritime Industry Operators

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WORKSHOP

**Prevention, Mitigation, and Response to Alcohol Misuse and Related
Incidents in the Commercial Maritime Industry
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The Southeastern Fisheries Association (SFA) represents the commercial seafood industry in Florida and the Southeast US. Our members include individual fishers and small family-owned vessels that engage in both commercial fishing and passenger services.

Seafarers, particularly those working on fishing vessels, are often described as independent and resourceful, embodying the adventurous spirit of the sea. Unlike typical employees of large companies, who must follow rigid rules and guidelines, seafarers operate with a great deal of autonomy while still adhering to the necessary regulations of the job.

Each vessel operates under the direction of its owner and captain. The owner sets the requirements, while the captain assigns duties to each crewmember, forming a cohesive team that relies on cooperation for success.

Commercial fishing vessels are regulated by numerous federal and state agencies, with the United States Coast Guard (USCG) as the lead authority overseeing safety, vessel operations, and construction. Depending on the type of vessel—whether commercial fishing or passenger-carrying—the USCG also provides recommendations and requirements concerning alcohol and drug use.

While most of these family-run operations do not have formal written policies on alcohol and drugs, the rules are communicated verbally. Alcohol and drugs are prohibited on board, and if a crewmember is found under the influence, they are immediately removed from the vessel, and appropriate action is taken by the captain or owner.

Based on my conversations with vessel owners and operators, as well as my personal experience, I do not perceive widespread issues with substance abuse or other intoxicants within the industry. Similarly, I have not encountered or heard reports of sexual harassment or assault in the maritime industry. While I don't have specific statistics, my experience suggests that these issues are no more prevalent here than in other sectors—and likely less so.

Factors such as long hours at sea, limited sleep, stress from poor harvests, and close quarters during multi-day trips could contribute to potential problems. Many fishing trips last several days, sometimes up to two weeks, and vessels—often under 60 feet—provide tight living conditions for the crew. However, these close quarters make it easier to detect any issues, including substance abuse or harassment. When problems do arise, they are dealt with promptly through the chain of command, with the captain typically addressing crew issues and the owner intervening if necessary.

If a crewmember struggles with substance abuse or other issues, the vessel owner may provide contact information for counseling services. If the problem persists, the individual is dismissed, and a replacement is hired.

To my knowledge, our association has not faced any issues related to sexual harassment or assault, and I have not heard of any such incidents within the fleets in the Gulf of Mexico or South Atlantic. Given the close-knit nature of these fleets, where news travels fast, I am confident that if such incidents were happening, they would be widely known.

I am not aware of any comprehensive database tracking substance abuse or sexual harassment within the maritime industry, aside from possible data maintained by the USCG. However, I view the lack of data as a positive indicator, suggesting that these issues are not widespread. When accidents do occur, their rarity speaks to the professionalism and dedication of those in the maritime industry.

Continued education on the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse is essential to preventing future incidents. Understanding how these substances impact both work and personal life helps individuals make informed decisions. While some may still struggle, peer pressure and ongoing education have reduced the prevalence of these issues.

The American seafood industry relies on the hard work and dedication of fishing crews who harvest fresh, sustainable seafood from US waters. I am proud to represent an industry that not only provides safe working environments for its employees but also ensures a steady supply of fresh seafood to American tables.