Partnering to Save Lives: Alaska Sea Grant’s Role in Marine Safety

Issue

Alaskans use the high seas, coastal waters, and rivers for commercial fishing, subsistence harvests, and recreation. But Alaska’s waters are cold and the weather often hazardous. During 1990-2000 the drowning rate for subsistence and recreational boaters in Alaska was the highest in the nation, and commercial fishing is the most dangerous occupation in the United States.

Response

In 1985, Kodiak Marine Advisory agent Hank Pennington founded the nonprofit Alaska Marine Safety Education Association (AMSEA). AMSEA focuses on drowning prevention and water safety, and trains people to handle emergencies in extreme environmental conditions. Today AMSEA is known worldwide as one of the most effective marine safety training networks. Alaska Sea Grant partners with AMSEA in a number of ways:

- Marine safety instruction: Five Marine Advisory faculty are certified AMSEA marine safety drill instructors. They facilitate federally required emergency drill training on commercial fishing vessels and train people of all ages from all walks of life. With agents in rural Alaska, safety training is provided in remote western towns like Savoonga and Unalaska.
- Instructional materials: During 2002-2006 Marine Advisory videographer Deborah Mercy produced two marine safety videos in partnership with AMSEA. Alaska Sea Grant Education Services published and reprinted five safety manuals written by AMSEA staff and distributed thousands of the products.
- The award-winning Web publication Boatkeeper, authored by Terry Johnson, includes information on safe operation and maintenance of vessels.
- Leadership and oversight: Paula Cullenberg is a longtime active member of the AMSEA Board of Directors. In addition, she coauthored a national review of fishing observer safety training programs.

Outcomes/Impacts

- Since 1990, commercial fishing fatalities in Alaska decreased by 66%, the largest drop of any region of the nation.
- Commercial fishing drowning deaths in Alaska in the last five years have averaged 13 annually, down from 38.
- Since 1990, drowning from subsistence and recreational boating decreased by 50%.
- Over 120,000 people and over 5,000 Alaska fishermen have been trained through the AMSEA/Sea Grant instructor network since 1985.
- Fishery observers have the skills to perform USCG-approved vessel safety inspections.
- NOAA fishery observer programs nationwide have adopted new safety training standards as recommended by the national review coauthored by Cullenberg.
- Water Wise, a book published by Alaska Sea Grant, is used in Alaska Water Wise classes offered statewide by the Alaska Office of Boating Safety.
- Since 1991 hundreds of safety trainers, including the USGC, have relied on the book Beating the Odds on Northern Waters as their primary teaching tool. Published by Alaska Sea Grant, the book has been distributed to 22,000 people.