

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105289](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Commercial fishing has one of the highest industry death rates in the U.S., according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Since fiscal year 2011, multiple commercial fishing vessel safety requirements have been enacted. As the principal federal agency for ensuring marine safety, the U.S. Coast Guard is responsible for implementing statutory requirements related to fishing vessel safety.

GAO reviewed the Coast Guard's commercial fishing vessel safety efforts as a follow-on to other GAO work to address a provision in statute. This report examines Coast Guard efforts to (1) improve commercial fishing vessel safety; (2) implement related key statutory requirements enacted from fiscal years 2011 through 2021; and (3) incorporate key performance assessment steps for its commercial fishing vessel safety program.

To address these objectives, GAO reviewed relevant laws, as well as Coast Guard documentation and data on its efforts to improve fishing vessel safety. GAO also observed vessel exams, and interviewed Coast Guard headquarters and field-based officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations to the Coast Guard, including to implement alternate safety standards for older vessels, develop a plan with time frames to implement the other outstanding statutory requirements, and fully incorporate key performance management practices. DHS concurred with five of six recommendations. GAO maintains that the findings in the report support all of the recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105289](#). For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777 or MacLeodH@gao.gov.

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COAST GUARD

Additional Actions Needed to Improve Commercial Fishing Vessel Safety Efforts

What GAO Found

Coast Guard efforts to promote commercial fishing vessel safety include conducting dockside exams, engaging with industry, and collaborating with other federal agencies. A dockside exam includes a review of a vessel's documents and safety equipment. Vessels that successfully complete an exam receive a 2-year safety decal from the Coast Guard. In addition, the agency engages with industry through safety trainings and policy letters, among other efforts. The Coast Guard also collaborates with other federal agencies, such as the National Marine Fisheries Service, by sharing accident data and supporting vessel safety research.

Commercial Fishing Vessels in Newport, Oregon



Source: GAO. | [GAO-23-105289](#)

The Coast Guard fully implemented five of 22 key statutory requirements related to various aspects of commercial fishing vessel safety (e.g., equipment, training, exams) enacted from fiscal years 2011 through 2021. However, it has either partially or not implemented 17 requirements. One requirement that the Coast Guard does not intend to implement is to develop alternate safety standards for older fishing vessels, which account for almost 80 percent of fishing vessel losses. The Coast Guard stated it does not have the authority to address the requirement to develop alternate safety standards for older fishing vessels. However, based on GAO's review of the applicable statutory provisions, the Coast Guard does have the authority to implement this requirement. In June 2016, the Coast Guard issued a proposed rule intended to address nine of the other 16 outstanding requirements. However, as of August 2022, the rule had not been finalized, and the Coast Guard had no detailed plan for implementing these requirements. Developing and implementing alternate safety standards for older vessels and developing a plan with time frames for implementing the other 16 requirements would help to address the Coast Guard's statutory responsibilities and support efforts to prevent fishing vessel losses and related fatalities.

The Coast Guard has established strategic goals and performance goals for its commercial fishing vessel safety program. However, it has not fully incorporated other key performance management practices, such as establishing performance goals that fully address all aspects of its strategic goals, setting realistic targets for its performance goals, and using performance data to assess progress towards program goals. Fully incorporating such practices could help the Coast Guard better assess program performance and address any performance issues.