

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106729](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Commercial fishing is an important part of the economy, yet one of the most hazardous occupations in the U.S. The U.S. Coast Guard is the primary federal agency responsible for marine safety, which includes enforcing safety requirements for fish tender vessels.

The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for GAO to review issues related to load line requirements for fish tender vessels. This report addresses: (1) the load line and stability requirements for fish tender vessels; and the extent the Coast Guard (2) collected data on the activities of commercial fishing industry vessels in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest as they pertain to tendering and what its data show, and (3) addressed fish tender vessel noncompliance with load line requirements.

GAO assessed relevant statutes, regulations, and Coast Guard documentation and data; and interviewed officials from the Coast Guard and commercial fishing industry (such as seafood companies and industry associations).

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending the Coast Guard (1) assess the feasibility of updating its system of record for commercial fishing industry vessels to capture multiple service types, (2) fully assess safety risks posed to fish tender vessels participating in any proposed alternative compliance program, and (3) clearly identify the program's legal basis. The Department of Homeland Security concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106729](#). For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777 or macleodh@gao.gov.

February 2024

COAST GUARD

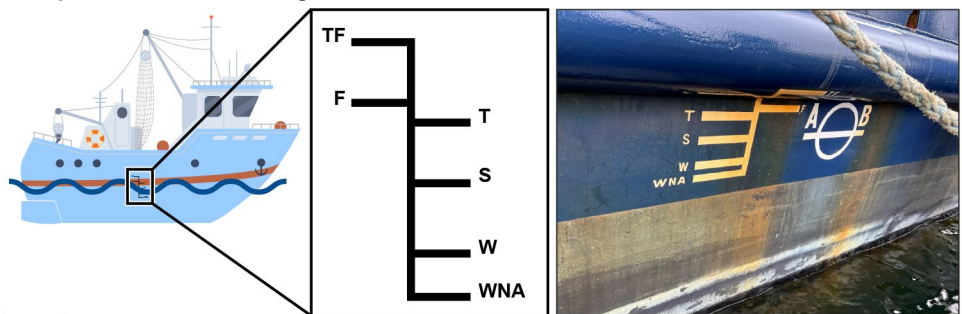
Enhanced Safety Oversight Needed for Fish Tender Vessels

What GAO Found

Under U.S. law, certain fish tender vessels are subject to load line and stability requirements to ensure their safety in different waters, including by reducing their likelihood of capsizing.

- A fish tender vessel supplies and transports fish from a catcher vessel to a processing facility.
- A load line ensures a vessel's overall seaworthiness and includes maintaining certain structural features such as watertight closures.

Example of Load Line Markings on a Fish Tender Vessel



Legend

TF	Tropical freshwater load line	S	Summer seawater load line
F	Freshwater load line	W	Winter seawater load line
T	Tropical seawater load line	WNA	Winter North Atlantic seawater load line

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information; GAO (photo); GreenSkyStudio/stock.adobe.com (illustration). | GAO-24-106729

The Coast Guard's data system captures information on the activities of commercial fishing industry vessels but does not capture data on vessels engaging in multiple service types, such as both catching and tendering fish. As a result, the Coast Guard is unable to generate a reliable list of fish tender vessels to identify which vessels are subject to load line requirements and the extent they have been in accidents. By assessing the feasibility of updating its system to capture multiple service types, the Coast Guard will be better positioned to oversee fish tender vessels.

In 2015, the Coast Guard recognized that some vessels that were operating as part-time fish tender vessels were not in compliance with load line requirements. In August 2019, the Coast Guard created a task force that proposed an alternative compliance program that would exempt certain fish tender vessels from load line requirements while still providing an appropriate level of oversight. The task force paused its work after May 2022 without (1) fully assessing the safety risks posed to vessels participating in such a program, and (2) clearly identifying the proposed program's legal basis. Should the Coast Guard pursue implementation of a program, fully assessing the safety risks posed to fish tender vessels without a load line can help it ensure that any proposed alternative compliance program maximizes vessel safety within existing resource limitations. By clearly identifying a legal basis for the program, the Coast Guard can better ensure that any proposed program is consistent with its legal authorities.