



Fish Harvester Survives Cold Atlantic - Safety Must Be Priority

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“They are going to think I had a heart attack.”

This is how Andy Brown, a seasoned fish-harvester from Eastport thought his obituary might read as he tried to survive the freezing Atlantic waters.

“You fish your whole life, take all the safety courses and you know the risks - still I found myself coming up for air in the cold ocean water. My only thought was how do I survive?” In his mid-50s, Andy’s thoughts were of his family, his wife, his daughter and grandchildren who were visiting from away.

“They almost attended a funeral,” said Andy. “I had to get back into that boat.”

Andy can recall heading out in his boat alone to check his lobster pots. He can remember making sure all the gear was working. Then it happened. Andy still can’t explain exactly what occurred, but all of sudden the boat lurched one way and he was flung into the water. To make matters worse Andy didn’t have his PFD on.

As Andy explains, “here I am, gasping for air, weighted down with a load of clothes including my boots. The adrenaline is pumping and I have to quickly decide what I do now.”

The shoreline was visible and his desire to swim for it was strong. But Andy's safety training told him to stay with the boat. Maybe he wouldn’t make it if he tried to swim. Andy decided to swim for his life, literally, and grab the moving boat which was circling.

The first attempt failed but with the adrenaline going mad, Andy swam out to try again as the boat circled one more time in an even wider arc. This time it worked. Andy held on for dear life to the vessel and made his way to the stern where he was able to shut off the motor. Now he had to get into the boat.

Andy knew his strength was weakening. He tried to haul himself directly into the boat but his soaked clothes would not allow it. He then moved to where the winch was located and somehow with loads of exertion and using the winch he rolled himself in the boat.

After getting himself to shore, Andy recalls needing to stop and rest twice as he made for his vehicle. His next recollection is getting out of his car in his driveway and calling for his wife. By the time the EMS arrived Andy was in bed with warm towels around him. Despite his initial reluctance Andy was taken to hospital where he was properly examined and tested. He remained in hospital for a couple of weeks and is now continuing his recovery at home.

Andy knows he was very lucky. Things could have easily gone so drastically wrong.

“Accidents do happen. If at all possible don’t go on the water alone, wear your PFD and never take your safety for granted.”

Safety: We Can Do Better

We know fish harvesters are committed to improving safety in the fishing industry. It is evident in their investment in safety training and onboard equipment. Today's fishing vessels are better equipped with life-saving equipment and preventative technology than ever before. However, fatalities still occur.

According to provincial statistics, over last five years, 11 harvesters have lost their lives and 653 harvesters suffered injuries. The impact on family members, friends and communities is long lasting.

The message from the Newfoundland and Labrador Fish Harvesting Safety Association (NL-FHSA) is simple: It is important we do everything we can to ensure all crewmembers return home safely to their families this fishing season.

Many incidents can be avoided if proper preparation is taken to eliminate and reduce hazards. We all have a role to play in ensuring all safety procedures are followed and personal protective equipment is worn.

Before leaving port, it is important we take the necessary time to ensure the vessel is seaworthy. Make certain the engine is running smoothly and all equipment is properly inspected and maintained. It is also crucial we prepare and use a pre-sailing safety checklist.

Always use appropriate gangways for access to and from the vessel. Vessel movement creates a hazard during boarding and exiting the vessel. Fatalities have occurred where the use of proper gangways would have prevented.

The use of personal flotation devices (PFDs) is essential. Harvesters working on the decks of fishing vessels without wearing personal flotation devices are at high risk of drowning. Wearing the PFD increases your chances of survival.

The stability of your fishing vessel is something you depend on, for both your livelihood and your life. Never overload the vessel. Ensure your catch is properly penned and gear and equipment is properly secured. Ensure hatch covers are secure and watertight.

Keeping your vessel safe requires good decision making and good actions. Even if your vessel is a safe one that complies with all the rules, poor operational decisions can have serious consequences. Leave plenty of safety margins for bad weather, changing sea states and decreasing fuel levels so that you can make it home safely.

Check for areas on upper decks that can be made safer by installing guardrails to prevent falls from height.

Other Safety Tips include wearing proper hearing protection, ensuring the First Aid Kit is fully stocked and readily available; fire extinguishers are working and fire buckets and axes onboard; proper provisions - plenty of food, water & personal supplies and life jackets, immersion suits, and life buoys are readily accessible and maintained.

Order your Safety Checklist:

The Fish Harvesters Safety Association has prepared a detailed Pre-departure Safety Checklist that is laminated. Contact the NL-FHSA to get yours.

The Safety Association conducts safety workshops around the province – be sure to attend the next one in your area.

For more information please contact the NL-FHSA at 709-722-8177 or visit www.nlfhsa.com.

