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MARINE SAFETY INFORMATION BULLETIN
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TOWING FROM A HIGH RIG ABOARD COMMERCIAL FISHING VESSELS

The 2014 Maine scallop season will kick off on December 1 with high expectations for a revitalized fishery that has seen a gradual improvement over the last several years. Due to a promising supply, there will likely be an increased number of fishermen looking to take advantage of the opportunity by converting their fishing vessels into driggers. These converted driggers have a history of capsizing, and vessel owners and operators should recognize how vessel modifications can decrease vessel stability and create an extremely hazardous condition.

In 2009, two commercial fishing vessels, both of which were lobster vessels that were converted to drag for sea urchins, capsized and sank in Cobscook Bay, resulting in the unfortunate death of five fishermen. Investigations revealed that both vessels were towing from the top of a 15-20 foot tall A-frame, and that the drag of these fishing vessels likely became entangled on the seafloor, which may have compounded the vessels' instability and led to their capsizing.

The conversion of lobster boats to sea urchin or scallop driggers may include the addition of an A-frame or other rig used to handle and tow the drag, which may decrease the vessel's stability by raising its center of gravity. Furthermore, the unsafe practice of dragging from a point high in the rigging also makes a vessel more susceptible to capsizing, especially if the drag should "quarter" the vessel and no longer lead directly behind the vessel's stern. This "quartering" situation may occur if the drag gets entangled on the seafloor and the boat turns to port or starboard due to tidal currents or rudder action. Additionally, if the winch used to tow the drag is not fitted with operational safety devices designed to release when the drag is entangled on the seafloor, the vessel may be subjected to forces that could cause it to capsize.

To minimize the risk of capsizing while dragging, owners and operators should consider the following actions:

- 1) Install a snatch block on the vessel's transom, at centerline, and run the tow wire from the A-frame through the snatch block and out to the drag. This action will lessen forces prone to capsizing the vessel.
- 2) Install an A-frame that is capable of lowering while the vessel is engaged in towing the drag, or install an A-frame that is constructed of a lightweight material such as aluminum. Both these actions will lower the vessel's center of gravity, and may make the vessel less likely to capsize.

- 3) Install a winch with a high tension safety release that would allow the winch to release if the drag gets entangled on the seafloor. This modification may lessen forces prone to capsizing the vessel.
- 4) In situations where the drag is entangled on the seafloor and the tow is under tension, try to keep the drag dead astern by avoiding rudder movements. This action may lessen forces prone to capsizing the vessel.
- 5) Before making any modification to the original construction of a vessel, an engineer or naval architect should be consulted to assess how the modification will affect the vessel's stability.

For questions regarding this bulletin, or to schedule a dockside safety exam, please contact any of the Sector Northern New England Commercial Fishing Vessel Safety Examiners listed below. Additional information regarding fishing vessel dockside safety exams is also available on the www.fishsafe.info website.

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