

The Top 5 Risks Facing Workboats

Staying Afloat



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According to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, commercial vessel-related fatalities and injuries have been trending downward in recent years. This is likely due to heightened awareness of the risks aboard these vessels, as well as a focus on hiring more seasoned crew members. Forty-one vessel-related fatalities were reported on commercial ships in 2010 – down significantly from the 85 reported 10 years earlier. At the same time, 139 vessel-related injuries were recorded, compared to 175. An experienced crew can help reduce risk exposure – if they know where to look. Typically, five major risks threaten commercial vessels.

1 Collision

As mentioned above, collisions – whether involving swimmers, kayakers, recreational boaters, commercial vessel operators, bridges or ports/marinas – can present a variety of dangers to vessel operators, crew and bystanders. In a well-known 1993 incident, barges being pushed by a tow boat collided with the Big Bayou Canot railroad bridge outside Mobile, Ala. The accident led to the deaths of 47 people on an Amtrak train that attempted to cross the damaged railroad bridge. An additional 103 people were injured, according to the National Transportation Safety Board. This tragic event helped to shed light on what can be done to prevent future accidents of this nature. In this particular incidence, dense fog was reported in the area, and the vessel might have taken additional precautions in light of the reduced visibility. Other tips to avoid collisions include ensuring:

- The pilot and crew are not fatigued.
- The vessel has proper lighting.
- The pilot is properly trained and experienced in navigating busy waterways, as well as tighter shipping channels.
- The pilot is aware of weather and traffic conditions and has proper work-

ing equipment onboard to assist with this task.

- Pilots and crew are trained to respond to and report an accident.

2 Fire

Another major risk to workboat owners, operators and their crew is fire. Aboard a vessel, fires can be started by something as small as a lit cigarette or something as significant as an explosion in the engine room. Fortunately, crew can take steps to keep fire risk at a minimum, ensuring:

- Electrical systems are installed and maintained by a certified marine electrician.
- Electrical connections and wiring are connected properly and not exhibiting signs of corrosion or wear and tear.
- Clear signage is posted.
- Fire extinguishers are inspected and accessible.
- Debris is cleared and flammable materials are kept in only necessary and limited quantities.
- Fuel sources are kept separate from ignitions and openings are covered.

3 Equipment

Equipment can also create on-board hazards for workboats. Older equipment, inadequately maintained equipment, and untrained operators can spark dangerous accidents. Tips to mitigate that risk exposure include:

- Servicing and inspecting machinery before use.
- Checking cable lines regularly.
- Allowing only trained crewmen to operate machinery.
- Adding rails to equipment where necessary.
- Wearing protective gear for head, eyes and hands.
- Avoiding standing on or over lines connected to winches under tension.
- Turning off the power source before making repairs to machinery.

4 Slips & Falls

Slips, trips, and falls are common injuries for many businesses and for workboats in particular, which have wet, slippery decks. Besides slipping on the wet deck, crewmembers can trip over an obstacle, fall from a ladder, or fall through an uncovered hatch in the deck. Several factors can play a part in these unfortunate accidents, such as improper shoes, fatigue, poor visibility, the transporting of heavy items and simply changing walking speed. To keep these accidents at a minimum, owners, operators and crew should ensure:

- Decks are clean and spills are cleaned immediately.
- Leaks are repaired.
- Gear is stowed and secure when out of use.
- Decks and walkways are painted with non-slip paint.
- Ramps are secured.
- De-icing procedures are implemented when necessary.
- Crew is aware of conditions of poor visibility.
- Proper lighting is used for night work.
- Non-slip safety shoes or boots are worn.
- Deck hatches and holes are covered or closed.

5 Man Overboard

Unfortunately, falling overboard remains a leading risk for workboat operators and crew. Slips and falls can contribute to these accidents, as well as fatigue. To prevent these accidents from occurring, all crew working on the deck must wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device (PFD) or life jacket. Other tips to prevent crew from falling off the vessel include:

- Maintaining PFDs and keeping them easily accessible.
- Training crew to use lifesaving equipment.
- Ensuring vessels over 26 feet have a

life buoy ring accessible.

- Keeping all lifesaving equipment aboard easily accessible and in good condition.
- Marking the perimeter of the deck with paint and installing rails where appropriate.
- Conducting a job hazard analysis and crew safety training regularly.
- Monitoring crew fatigue and lack of concentration.

Know Your Risks

Being mindful of safety practices is key for preventing and reducing crew injuries and fatalities—and it's also good for business. In fact, new safety standards for towing vessels are required under new regulations. Subchapter M, finalized by the U.S. Coast Guard in June, describes comprehensive safety guidance and sets compliance rules, standards and oversight for towing vessels.

Vessel owners can also contact risk control experts and safety engineers to assist them in evaluating the risk exposure of individual vessels or simply talk to their insurance agents. These professionals can make recommendations and risk mitigation plans to help crew operate their vessels in the safest manner possible.

Workboats will always be an essential part of America's waterways, helping to transport goods and services from shore to shore. Let's be sure our crews are fit for the task by keeping them safe and sound.

The Author

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