



News Release

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“Deadliest Catch” Captain Calls Fishing Safety Funding Cuts “Criminal” Commercial fishing claims nearly 60 lives each year, according to safety experts

SEATTLE, Wash.—Congress may cut funding for the only substantive safety research program that protects fishermen who work in the most dangerous industry in the United States, a prospect Seattle-based Keith Colburn calls “criminal.” Colburn is captain of the *Wizard*, one of seven fishing vessels featured on Discovery Channel’s “Deadliest Catch.”

The President’s FY 2012 budget proposes the elimination of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing (AFF) Program. In 2011, nearly \$23 million was distributed among seven regional NIOSH education and health centers and to the Anchorage-based NIOSH Fishing Safety Research Program, which received just \$1.5 million of this funding. The mandate of the AFF Program is to reduce work-related injuries, illnesses and deaths in the United States among workers in the agriculture, forestry and commercial fishing industries.

“The Bering Sea crab fleet was the most dangerous fishery in the United States, period,” says Colburn, who also serves as spokesperson for the Coast Guard’s boating safety campaign. “The NIOSH office has opened a lot of people’s eyes not only in crabbing but in all fisheries. Without their information and research, we are back in the stone ages. To me, it almost seems criminal to shut down an office in the United States that has a track record of success and provides quantifiable solid results on behalf of hardworking fishermen.”

From 2000 to 2009, 504 commercial fishermen lost their lives working in the United States. More than 80% of these deaths occurred due to a sinking vessel or other vessel disaster, or man overboard accident. Many commercial fishermen are subjected to hazardous working conditions, strenuous labor, long work hours and harsh weather.

“As a research organization, we play a vital and unique role in protecting fisherman in that we identify an injury hazard in a particular fishery and work to mitigate the hazard,” says Jennifer Lincoln, Ph.D., Injury Epidemiologist for the NIOSH Alaska Pacific Regional Office. “We work with industry to solve problems rather than duplicating the regulatory work of the Coast Guard or Alaska Department of Fish & Game.”

NIOSH interventions are having a substantial impact on safety. On May 20, the NIOSH AFF Program was named one of the "Ten Great Public Health Achievements" for 2001-2010 by the CDC in part because of the drastic reduction in deaths for Bering Sea crab fisherman, 770 deaths per 100,000 workers to 260 deaths.

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NIOSH scientists created a fatality database and surveillance system to evaluate and address injuries and deaths for commercial fishing fleets in the United States. Lincoln and her scientific team identified lack of personal flotation device (PFD) use as one of the main reasons men die after falling overboard. They were able to increase use of PFDs among fishermen, which improved man overboard prevention and recovery.

“Prior to participating in the study with NIOSH, our only mandatory time to wear a life jacket on board the *Wizard* was when working up on the crab stack, which is phenomenally dangerous,” Colburn explains. “After working with the Anchorage office and using the new and improved types of PFDs, I instituted a mandatory PFD rule on the boat: you don’t go on deck without one.”

“What NIOSH has been very good at is looking at regional and fishery-specific risks and working with that group of fishermen to solve that particular problem, and quite frankly, that’s the way forward with this,” says Chris Woodley, chief of the Prevention Department for the Coast Guard Sector Puget Sound. “NIOSH has been a leader in taking that approach. The Coast Guard and National Marine Fishery Service are very much dependent on NIOSH data to move forward with [our] safety programs,” he adds.

Congressman Jim McDermott is the only legislator from Washington State to sign a letter to the chairman and ranking member of the House Appropriation Subcommittee on Labor, HHS and Education requesting that funding for the NIOSH AFF Program remain intact for FY 2012.

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The Northeast Center for Agricultural Medicine and Health (NEC) is one of seven national centers directed to conduct research, education and prevention/intervention programs in agricultural, forestry and fishing industries.