

## **US Coast Guard Auxiliary volunteers work to fill fishing boat safety check gap**

WASHINGTON —The U.S. Coast Guard’s commercial fishing vessel examination program has helped save lives since 1991, but a new federal requirement means civilian volunteers of the Coast Guard Auxiliary will soon have a bigger role in checking boats and equipment headed out to sea.

Ken Lawrenson coordinates the work of civilian, active duty Coast Guard and Coast Guard Auxiliary vessel examiners throughout Alaska. He said harvesting crab, cod and halibut from the rich fishing grounds of the North Pacific and Bering Sea is “one of the most dangerous jobs a person can have.”

Alaska has fewer than 30 qualified examiners to check about 3,800 vessels that will fall under the new requirement, and other regions face similar potential work overloads.

“I wish I had four times as many,” Lawrenson said. “We’re looking to the Auxiliary to augment the workforce.”

Vessel safety examinations have been voluntary so far, but a provision in the federal Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2010 makes them mandatory for all fishing vessels operating in U.S. waters. The provision is expected to go into effect in late 2012.

“We’re looking at an increase in workload without the proportionate increase in resources,” Lawrenson said.

American citizens over 17 years old with experience or interest in the fishing industry can join the Coast Guard Auxiliary and help this effective program improve safety in America’s commercial fishing fleet.

Nationwide, the Auxiliary currently has 216 volunteers qualified to perform commercial fishing vessel exams, but many more are needed.

Al Morris, an Auxiliary member and former commercial fisherman in Kodiak, Alaska, recently underwent a week of intense vessel exam training in Yorktown, Va., working alongside active duty trainees. He has seen firsthand the improved safety record of fishing boats that participate in the vessel examination program.

“I felt that I could help fishermen follow the rules,” Morris said.

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