

Safety at Sea Training in Washington

by Eric Scigliano, Washington Sea Grant

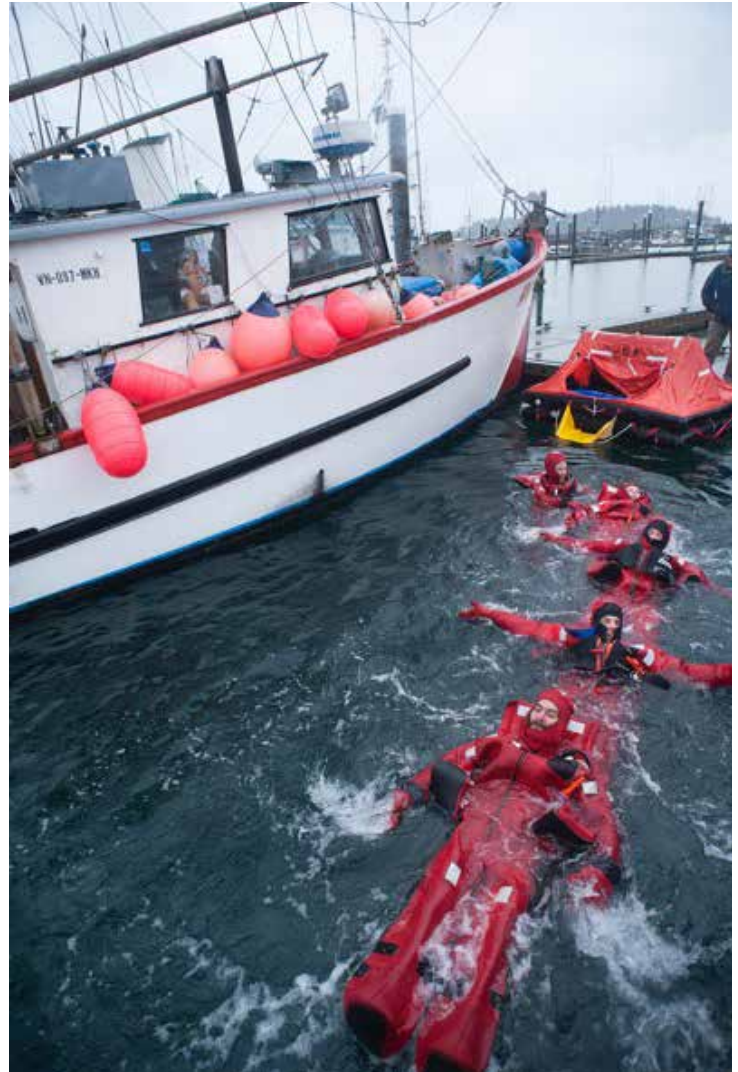
Commercial fishing is one of the nation's most dangerous occupations, nowhere more so than on the West Coast. Fatalities there have traditionally run even higher relative to hours fished than in Alaska, and the tribal salmon fishery along the Columbia River may have been the deadliest catch of all.

Until about six years ago, death perched like a hungry seagull over the Columbia River fishery, which employs 600 to 800 fishermen from four tribes in Washington, Oregon and Idaho. "We had fatalities for three years in a row," says Field Marketing and Safety Specialist Buck Jones at the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, which manages the fishery. "There was at least three in one season."

A suite of factors lay behind this grim tally, Jones explains. Safety equipment such as personal flotation devices and survival suits was often outdated, broken, or absent entirely. Crewmembers didn't know how or when to use it; as Jones says, "It's no good if you're not wearing it." And they lacked training generally in the safety and rescue procedures that spell the difference between life and death in an emergency.

Makah Tribal member practices putting on an emergency survival suit during a WSG Safety at Sea workshop, 2015.

To fill this gap, CRITFC turned to Washington Sea Grant (WSG). For more than two decades, WSG has offered Coast Guard-certified on-site classes on onboard perils ranging from shipboard fires and men overboard to capsizes and emergency evacuations. Sarah Fiskén, who coordinates the free classes, takes them where the fishermen are, from the ports of Bellingham, Port Townsend and Seattle to the Makah Tribe on remote Neah Bay and the Columbia River. In 2014 she and longtime colleagues Steve Harbell and Eric Olsson conducted WSG's 100th safety class, having trained more than 1,000 fishermen over two decades. Harbell



Makah fishermen learn to use survival suits in the Sea Safety training course with Washington Sea Grant.

Photo courtesy of Washington Sea Grant.

and Olsson have since retired, but the safety classes continue; WSG trained 211 fishermen in 2015.

"There was some resistance when we started the classes," says Jones. "They were seen as kind of a hindrance, or a pain in the neck." That resistance isn't unique to the Columbia fleet. Fishermen anywhere can be reluctant to change their ways, as Fiskén knows





Eric Olsen, Washington [right] and Sarah Fiskin [center] of Washington Sea Grant conducting a cold water survival class for tribal fishers in The Dalles. They have trained more than 100 Columbia River tribal fishers on cold water safety and survival and have held “man overboard” demonstrations at several Columbia River Indian Fishers Expos.
Photo courtesy of Les Brown, CRITFC Salmon Marketing.

from firsthand observation. She herself worked as a deckhand and cook aboard fishing vessels—a troller on Puget Sound, purse seiners in Southeast Alaska—in the 1970s and early ‘80s when very few women did. “When I started out, we didn’t have anything for safety—not even survival suits,” she recalls. Such experience confers essential onboard cred when dealing with crusty fishermen, “especially for a woman.”

Fiskin and the instructors she enlists have adapted their safety curriculum for the Lummi Tribe’s sea-cucumber dive fishery. They’ve also developed separate classes in first aid (emphasizing onboard emergencies such as hypothermia, near-drowning, lacerations and back-boarding) and navigating in the North Pacific’s famously fierce and fickle weather. In 2015, they launched a class in watchstanding, using a bridge simulator to teach basic navigation, rules of road, VHF radio and onboard lights. This preparation jumpstarts marine careers, making recruits useful as soon as they hit the bridge.

Bones aren’t the only things that get banged and broken at sea. Fiskin also hosts hands-on workshop in essential marine technologies, from diesel and outboard engines to hydraulic, refrigeration and electrical systems. Learning to maintain and repair these systems makes fishing more efficient and economic: fishermen avoid expensive service and towing fees and save valuable fishing time. And

it bolsters safety. A disabled, drifting boat is an endangered boat.

But it’s the safety classes, where WSG’s commitment to marine workforce training began, that yield the most dramatic results. In December 2015, soon after completing a class, all four crewmen on a Makah fishing vessel survived a nighttime sinking. In the six years since WSG brought its safety course to the Columbia, not a single tribal fisherman has perished on the river.

Improvements in safety gear and stricter enforcement by the Inter-Tribal Fish Commission have also helped make that fishery safer, says Buck Jones. But “the education

and training really turned the corner.” 🏴‍☠️



Lummi Tribal members learn safety skills in the Sea Safety training course with Washington Sea Grant.
Photo courtesy of Washington Sea Grant.

Safety at Sea Training program: <https://wsg.washington.edu/students-teachers/sign-up/>

Read more on Washington Sea Grant’s training programs for boaters: <https://wsg.washington.edu/community-outreach/boating/>



Good News for 2017: Columbia Basin Water Supply Update

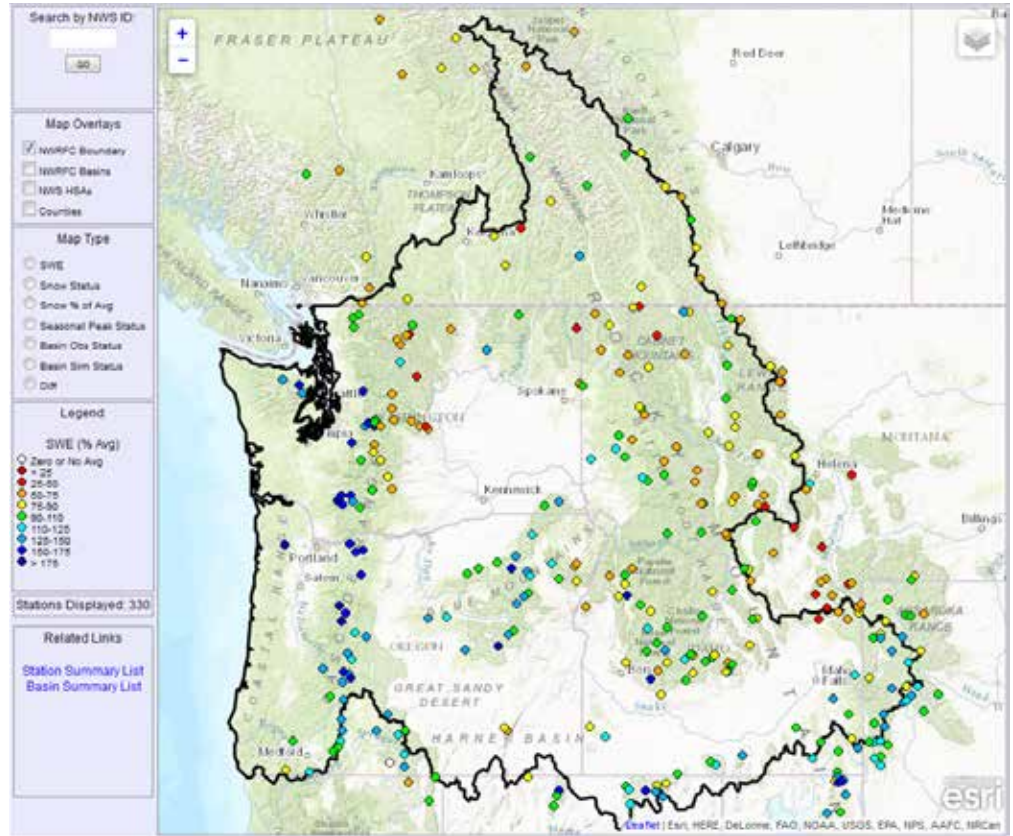
by Kyle Dittmer, CRITFC Hydrologist/Meteorologist

The new water year, which started October 1, began with tons of rain. Many station records were shattered with 400-500% of normal totals. This weather pattern is the start of a “La Niña” event where Pacific Northwest winters are colder than normal with more rain and snowfall. This good news means that spring snowmelt runoff will be higher than normal and closer to its traditional timing. This runoff feeds the river flow which helps the fish migrate down the river and out to the ocean. Ocean conditions are more favorable for salmon survival during La Niña years.

The figure to the right shows the current state of the region’s snowpack. Lower than expected snowlines means more mid-to-higher elevation snow is accumulating more quickly for this point in the season.

Snowpack, along with monthly and seasonal precipitation and current river flow, are the key components that are used to calculate the seasonal Water Supply Forecast. This forecast is used by water management agencies – U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, BPA, and the U.S.

Bureau of Reclamation – to determine how much water is released from the dams for power, irrigation, and fish. The latest CRITFC water forecast is that the Columbia River will be 106% of normal at The Dalles for the April-July runoff period. NOAA has made a more conservative prediction of 97% of normal. 🏊



Snow Water Equivalent values show average to above average levels in the Cascade and Blue Mountains, plus the Upper Snake in Wyoming but below average in the Northern Rocky Mountains. NOAA/National Weather Service, updated on 15 Dec 2016.

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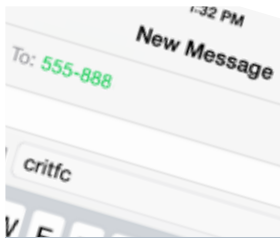
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Salmon Remain Our Constant in Uncertain Times

by Patrick Luke, CRITFC Chairman

The recent elections have been a source of concern and uncertainty for people around the world. Now as much as ever, we commit ourselves to *Wy-Kan-Ush-Mi Wa-Kish-Wit*, the Spirit of the Salmon.

The tribes are bound to take care of the salmon for future generations. This commitment is expressed many ways, including through the work of CRITFC. By unity of actions, the four tribes and CRITFC have persisted and succeeded through many administrations, both Republican and Democrat. The tribes and the salmon runs are as strong now as anytime in the last 65 years.

Pacific salmon are iconic throughout the Northwest, both in the United States and Canada. Together, we can continue our efforts to care for the salmon and overcome any uncertainties. Indeed, many people, tribal and non-tribal alike, will look to the tribes for inspiration and reassurance. 



CRITFC Intern Isaac Trimble sampling salmon at Bonneville Dam.