

Statement of  
The Honorable James L. Oberstar  
Hearing On  
“Commercial Fishing Vessel Safety”  
April 25, 2007

Mr. Chairman, thank you for scheduling today’s hearing on commercial fishing safety in the United States. It is important that this Subcommittee look at areas that the Federal Government can help provide opportunities for both the commercial fishing industry and the government to promote safety in what is the nation’s most hazardous industry.

Commercial fishing has been a vital part of the economy of coastal America since before we were a nation. The U.S. is the fourth largest harvester of wild fish in the world, and we export more fish – in volume – than we import. It is an industry worth billions of dollars that is part of the fabric of many coastal communities, and sustains hundreds of thousands of families.

But, commercial fishing is also a deadly occupation, unnecessarily taking the lives of men and women at a rate almost 30-times higher than the rest of the American labor force; and a large number of crewmembers are maimed and injured – some permanently – from accidents on commercial fishing vessels. In addition the men and women of the Coast Guard often must risk their lives to rescue fishermen from vessels that are not built, maintained or operated in accordance with good marine practice.

For too long Congress believed that, “as long as only the fisherman is hurt in an accident, it can remain his own business, accomplished at his own risk.” In 1988 statutes were adopted requiring the installation, maintenance and use of modern emergency rescue equipment. But, commercial fishing vessels are the last major category of “uninspected vessels” – there is minimal if any Federal oversight of the construction, maintenance and operation of most commercial fishing vessels.

Today the Subcommittee will examine the safety of commercial fishing vessels and the extent to which existing statutes have improved safety on board these vessels. We will learn about alternatives that could prevent casualties on commercial fishing vessels from occurring; minimize the effect of a casualty, after it has occurred; and maximize lives saved, if the vessel must be abandoned.

I am hopeful that today’s hearing will help the Committee understand some steps we can take to make this profession safer for the men and women who provide us with an important source of high quality, healthy protein.

Mr. Chairman, I look forward to working with you and the other Members of the Subcommittee to develop strategies to enhance commercial fishing safety.

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