

The Last Voyage of the Arctic Rose

Congress says mandatory safety inspections for fishing vessels not needed. What could go wrong?

The calendar read January 2001 as the Arctic Rose set course for a Bering Sea teeming with controversy. The fishing vessel itself was in a world of trouble as it departed from Fisherman's Terminal in Seattle.

In fact, the Arctic Rose may not have been seaworthy. In 1999, the boat had passed a stability test, but afterward the owner had made a number of weight additions, removals, and relocations that might have made it less safe. No one can say for sure that it was safe, a Coast Guard investigation found, because the owner "did not contact a naval architect to evaluate the effect of the weight changes on the vessel's stability."

There's also reason to doubt that the crew was sufficiently qualified. Because the pay was relatively low, the Arctic Rose had difficulties attracting qualified crew members, the Coast Guard said. The vessel filled out its 15-man crew by hiring inexperienced, poorly trained workers off the street or at the dock. Three of them were undocumented foreign nationals who boarded under fake English-sounding names, and as the Coast Guard later revealed, at least some of the crew probably failed to take the requisite drug and alcohol test.

The Coast Guard also found that the Arctic Rose was preparing all along to violate federal fishing regulations on the trip — a factor that could have made the trip more profitable, but also more dangerous.

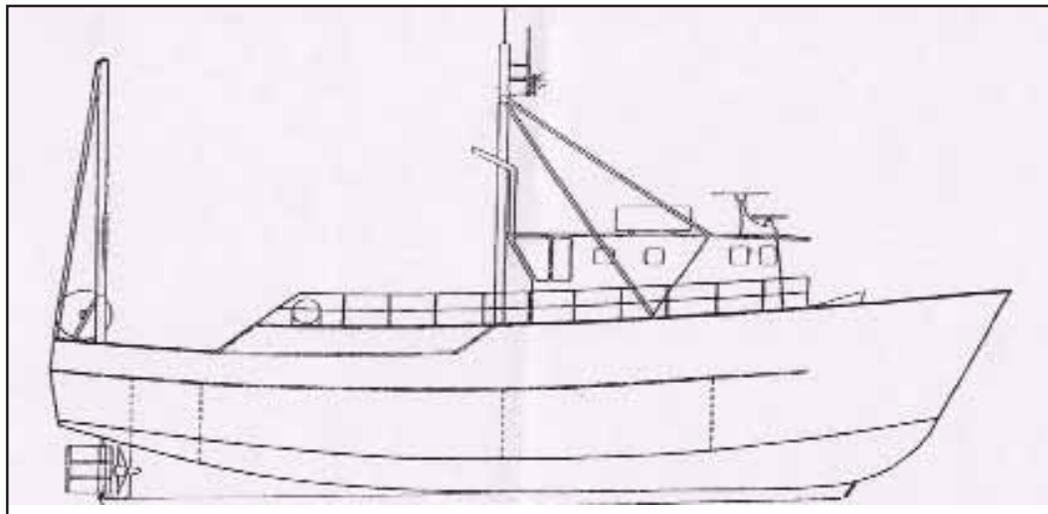
The Arctic Rose was among the 900 Seattle-based vessels that fish commercially in Alaska, catching about \$300 million worth of fish as priced at the dock, or about 60 percent of the total value taken from Alaskan waters. Of every million dollars worth of fish caught in Alaskan waters, only \$160,000 is caught by vessels owned by people who are residents of Alaska.

Seattle's fleet of vessels includes 19 catcher-processor vessels that catch and process fish — usually pollock — into fillets or surimi products. Also known as factory trawlers or at-sea processors, they are a full football field in length and employ up to 120 workers.

A second category is known as "catcher vessels." These boats, which are much smaller, deliver their catch to the processor vessels or to on-shore plants.

A third category is known as the "head-and-gut" fleet. They catch flatfish and other species but not pollock. They dehead, gut and freeze the fish at sea, employing up to eight workers.

The head-and-gut fleet drags nets along the sea floor, pulling up most things in their path. They are known to damage deep sea coral and destroy crab



The Arctic Rose. Courtesy U.S. Coast Guard

and halibut. Most of these are thrown back dead. Because of the environmental damage they cause, the head-and-gut boats are said to be among the "dirtiest" in the Alaska fleet.

The Arctic Rose belonged to head-and-gut class, but on this trip and perhaps others was unlawfully operating as a catcher-processor vessel, the Coast Guard investigation found. To do so legally, the vessel would have had to undergo safety and stability inspections as required by federal regulations, which it did not do. And it carried more than twice the number of workers than

inner workings of the North Pacific Council to make sure their rivals aren't allocated an increased share of fish at their own expense. Together, they also typically fight measures giving further protections for marine mammals and habitat. In 2001, they formed the Marine Conservation Alliance to take their case to the public.

David Olney, whose company Arctic Sole Seafoods is owner of the Arctic Rose, was a "driving force" behind the founding of the Groundfish Forum back when it started in 1992, according to the Coast Guard investigation.



LAW ENFORCEMENT — The Coast Guard Cutter Morganthau investigates poaching and other violations in the Bering Sea. Photo by Paul Koberstein/Cascadia Times

are typical on a head-and-gut boat. The Coast Guard said none of the processing workers aboard the Arctic Rose had any safety or survival training other than introductory exposure to the location of survival gear and the donning of immersion suits.

Each of the classes of vessels in the Bering Sea fleet is represented by its own lobbying group. The factory trawlers have the At-Sea Processors, the catcher vessels have the United Catcher Boats, and the head-and-gutters have the Groundfish Forum. All are based in Seattle, all are competitive with one another and all carefully watch the

Two months and 1,700 miles after leaving Seattle, the Arctic Rose stopped over in the Alaska fishing port of Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Island chain, the most prolific fishing port in the U.S. Not only does Dutch Harbor lead the nation in the quantity of seafood landings, but its haul is more than twice that of second-place Empire, La. The port is the gateway to the most productive fishing grounds in U.S. waters, the Bering Sea, where commercial fishers caught 4.3 billion pounds in 2002, or about 52 percent of the entire reported U.S. com-

mercial catch.

The Arctic Rose left Dutch Harbor for an area in the Bering Sea known as "Cod Alley." Currents from the North Pacific make their primary entrance into the sea between islands near Cod Alley, providing an abundance of nutrients that feed large schools of fish as well as species up the food chain, like the sea lion.

Soon the vessel turned north, making a stop in St. Paul Island — some call it the "gas station of the Bering Sea" — for supplies. Then it chugged for the submerged Zemchug Canyon 200 miles to the northwest for a catch of sole.

The Bering Sea's weather can be extremely difficult to predict. In the early morning hours of April 2, 2001, a triple-point system pounded the Arctic Rose. A collision of three fronts — warm, cold and occluded — kicked up waves 20 feet high. But the storm was not the only factor in the accident. Someone had left open a watertight hatch that was supposed to be kept closed at all times. A huge wave swept over the ship, spilling water into the processing deck below.

The Arctic Rose sank in less than 8 minutes. Only the body of Capt. David Rundall was found; the other 14 men are missing and presumed dead. The vessel came to rest 428 feet below the Bering Sea's surface.

In January 2004, the Coast Guard issued its investigation report. It described the problems reported in this article, but did not call for any new regulations or laws requiring mandatory Coast Guard inspections of all Bering Sea fishing vessels for seaworthiness or vessel safety. Under intense lobbying by the fishing industry, Sen. Ted Stevens and Congress over the years have refused to approve legislation requiring vessels to pass Coast Guard safety or seaworthiness inspections. The Bering Sea fisheries remain the most dangerous occupation in the U.S.

"This was an accident that was probably completely preventable, no matter what the Coast Guard concluded," said Richard Hiscock, an ex-fisherman and now a marine safety expert. The law currently requires Coast Guard inspections only of vessels with a capacity of more than 200 tons. Like other vessels in the Bering Sea fleet, the Arctic Rose's "official" capacity was 199 tons. "They are all basically uninspected vessels," Hiscock said.

The Arctic Rose's David Olney refused to answer questions posed by Coast Guard investigators at public hearings. He remains owner of another ship, the Alaskan Rose, which was the first to respond to the Arctic Rose accident. That vessel continues to fish the Bering Sea, but has been renamed the "Tremont."