

Marijuana, fatigue and troubled waters found in Coastal Reign capsizing investigation that took two lives

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Trouble navigating through the dangerous south entrance of the Tillamook Bay Bar, combined with large waves, lack of sleep and marijuana use, led to the capsizing of a Warrenton commercial fishing vessel called Coastal Reign and the loss of two lives at the beginning of commercial crab season in 2021, a year-long investigation by the U.S. Coast Guard has discovered.

“The totality of the circumstances in my opinion, was negligent,” Capt. Christopher Coutu, a staff judge advocate for the U.S. Coast Guard said. “I wanted the district commander to consider that and consider that and move it to the U.S. Attorney’s Office for prosecution.”

A formal marine casualty investigation was launched immediately of the commercial fishing vessel which capsized Feb. 20, 2021.

Rear Adm. Anthony Vogt, Coast Guard Thirteenth District Commander, authorized the investigation pursuant to the authority contained in Title 46, United States Code, Section 6301 and the regulations promulgated thereunder, according to a release from the Coast Guard.

On Wednesday evening at 6 p.m., officials with the Coast Guard presented the findings of a formal marine casualty investigation involving the Coastal Reign during a town hall at Garibaldi City Hall. Victims' families were present along with community members. A full report of the findings and what was presented to the public can be found on the Coast Guard's website.

"The investigation confirms that the sinking of the Coastal Reign was a preventable accident," the report states.

The report recommends that Brandon Anderson, the master of the Coastal Reign, be referred for prosecution. The report also recommends that the Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit Portland issue a civil penalty against Anderson for negligence.

Coast Guard officials also stated in the report, they will turn over all information from the investigation if the State of Oregon is interested in pursuing criminal charges regarding the capsizing.

Investigators spoke to survivors and witnesses and examined footage of the event to determine the cause of the incident.

On Feb. 20, 2021, shortly after 4:30 p.m., the 38-foot fishing vessel attempted to cross the bar with four crew members and about two tons of Dungeness crab. They had spent the previous week crab fishing on multiple trips and wanted to sell their catch at Garibaldi, where they could get more money per pound than it would in the Warrenton Port.

The report also states, three of the four crew members, including Anderson, had smoked marijuana during the trip, including about half an hour before they tried to cross the bar.

The Tillamook Bay bar is one of the most hazardous in the country, "challenging even for the most experienced of operators," Capt. Christopher Coutu, the investigating officer from Coast Guard 17th District, said.

That day, the bar had been closed to recreational and uninspected passenger vessels under 40 feet long, but not to commercial fishing outfits.

Todd Chase, 51, the secondary operator from Warrenton, tried to enter the bar through the preferred route in the north, which is buoy-marked, but backed out due to the height of the waves, the report states.

Anderson brought the Coastal Reign "about 600 feet east of where he should have been," Coutu said.

Three waves struck the vessel's port side; the third capsized it. All four crew members were in the pilothouse when the vessel overturned.

Chase drowned before he was found. Zachary Zappone, 41, a deckhand, also from Warrenton, was pronounced dead at Oregon Health & Science University Hospital.

Evidence of marijuana on board was confirmed through drug tests and physical evidence during the investigation. Zappone's backpack, containing marijuana in a glass jar and a plastic bag, turned up while researching the site of the incident.

Chase did not partake in marijuana use and had expressed misgivings about drug use on the trip, the report found. His crew mates hid their drug use from him, according to the report.

Chase helped Zappone and the other deckhand put on their lifejackets. He was not wearing one himself; neither was Anderson.

The report recommends that Coast Guard 13th District conduct a water access management study of the area to figure out where to place buoys, and work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to determine how much of the Tillamook Bay jetties are underwater.