

# Public Forum on Fishing Vessel Classification Standards

Hosted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)  
In conjunction with the  
Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

*All local commercial fishing vessel owner/operators and  
regional shipbuilders are encouraged to attend!*

## **Background:**

According to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), commercial fishing is one of the most dangerous industries in the United States. However, the Coast Guard does not have the authority to inspect commercial fishing vessels, including how these vessels are constructed and maintained. Since 1988, fish processing vessels are required by law to be built and maintained to specific rules (standards) that have been established by a class society, a process known as classification or classing. In 2010 and 2012, U.S. law expanded this requirement to catcher vessels and fish tender vessels that are built after July 1, 2013, and are over 50 feet in length. The Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2015 further amended these requirements so that new catcher and fish tender vessels between 50 and 79 feet in length do not necessarily need to be classed. Instead, these ships can be designed and constructed to equivalent standards and overseen by naval architects and marine surveyors, which GAO refers to as an “alternative-to-class” approach.



## **GAO's Review:**

In the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2015, Congress required GAO to review commercial fishing vessel classification and understand the impact that classification requirements have on commercial fishing owners, operators, and shipbuilders in different regions of the U.S. Upon completion of our review, GAO will provide Congress with our results and issue a public report on commercial fishing vessel classification standards, including:

- 1) What is known about the number of vessel failures and human injuries and deaths among incidents involving commercial fishing vessels;
- 2) How U.S. regulations for commercial fishing vessel classification compare with other countries' regulations;
- 3) What is known about the challenges and costs, if any, associated with statutory requirements for constructing and maintaining commercial fishing vessels to class society standards; and
- 4) How the alternative-to-class approach compares with constructing and maintaining a commercial fishing vessel to class society standards.

### **Purpose of Forum:**

GAO would like to utilize this forum to solicit your candid opinions and real-life experiences on the impact that classification requirements have on how you purchase, construct, and operate your commercial fishing vessel(s), if any. During the forum, we would like to gain a better understanding of the:



- type and size of vessel(s) used in your operations;
- costs and challenges associated with constructing and maintaining your vessel(s) to classification standards;
- benefits and savings that you have realized from classing your vessel(s);
- impacts that classing requirements have had on your decision to either purchase a new vessel(s) or continue to operate your existing vessel(s); and
- potential benefits or challenges of the alternative-to-class approach.

### **Forum Approach:**

In order to maximize our limited time together, our forum will include facilitated discussions among smaller working groups. Prior to or during the designated time at the forum, you will be asked to complete a worksheet that will prepare you for the forum's working group brainstorm session. We ask that you take the time to respond to this worksheet candidly and thoroughly. Once divided into working groups, each team will be asked to complete an identical worksheet, ensuring that it collectively contains the more general opinions and experiences of the group. Prior to the conclusion of the forum, each working group will have the opportunity to share their responses with all those in attendance and time will be allotted for further discussion. Additionally, we will collect all completed worksheets at the close of the forum to ensure we have documentation of every individual's perspective, which we will use in the completion of our review, analysis, and final written report. Please note that the opinions and experiences you share with us will be safeguarded and our final report will not include any personal information.

### **Who is GAO?**

GAO is an independent, nonpartisan agency that works for Congress. Often called the "congressional watchdog," GAO investigates how the federal government spends taxpayer dollars. GAO employs roughly 3,000 people, whom collectively comprise 14 subject-area teams dispersed throughout its headquarters in Washington, D.C., as well as 11 regional offices across the United States.



### **Our Audit Team:**

Our team is part of GAO's Acquisition and Sourcing Management (ASM) subject-area team, which typically reviews big-ticket government purchases or assesses the government decision-making process prior to such purchases. Our team for this review includes:

- Michele Mackin, Director  
[Mackinm@gao.gov](mailto:Mackinm@gao.gov)
- Diana Moldafsky, Assistant Director  
[moldafskyd@gao.gov](mailto:moldafskyd@gao.gov)
- Laura Jezewski, Analyst-in-Charge  
[jezewskil@gao.gov](mailto:jezewskil@gao.gov), (937) 258-7945
- Erin Stockdale, Senior Analyst  
[stockdalee@gao.gov](mailto:stockdalee@gao.gov), (614) 804-7562
- Ramzi Nemo, Analyst  
[nemor@gao.gov](mailto:nemor@gao.gov), (202) 512-6272