

# Working in the Fishing Industry

By James Wilson

Natural resources are the backbone of Alaska's economy. Furs, gold, oil, timber, and fish have all been important in the development of the state. The fishing industry is one of Alaska's largest employers with over 40,000 people participating in the harvesting and processing of fisheries stocks during the course of a year.

The fishing industry is highly seasonal with intense activity during a limited period of time. The last year for which estimates of fish harvesting employment were produced was 1984 (Table 1). At the peak of the salmon season over 21,000 people were working on fishing boats. Peak employment for shellfish harvesting was nearly 2,300, while over 8,600 people worked the halibut season during May.

The highest levels of employment in seafood processing occur during the summer months corresponding with the salmon runs (Table 2). During 1986, seafood processing employment peaked at approximately 15,000 during July. Because of the seasonal nature of the work the industry depends heavily on migrant workers to harvest and process fish.

## Description of Work

Work on fishing vessels is typified by long hours in all kinds of weather. Fishing trips can last from one day to several weeks. The work is physically demanding and long hours are often worked under adverse conditions. Living conditions can be crowded and the earnings of workers may be low. Pay for fish harvesters is usually on a share basis and depends upon the success of the venture. Fishing boat crew members are expected to provide their own boots and clothing. Crew members will try to work in more than one fishery to maximize their earnings.

For seafood processing workers the work is usually indoors under wet, cold, and noisy conditions. Warm clothing and good boots are recommended. Rain gear is sometimes required. Jobs often involve long shifts that require standing most of the time while reaching for and handling fish and shellfish. In some cases the employer provides room and board for their processing workers.

Work on fishing vessels is typified by long hours, physically demanding work, and crowded living conditions while earnings of workers may be low.

Table 1  
1984 Fish Harvesting Employment  
by Commercial Fishery

	Salmon	Shell Fish	Halibut	Bottom Fish	Sable Fish	Herring	Other
Annual Average	5,331	1,177	930	176	155	423	10
January	122	861	0	198	35	44	3
February	248	1,582	0	181	47	0	4
March	429	2,272	0	245	63	584	26
April	543	1,102	0	306	182	1,149	23
May	719	614	8,689	216	139	2,603	13
June	16,043	961	483	110	407	643	3
July	21,834	973	244	91	281	20	3
August	16,681	860	1,169	79	230	4	0
September	6,233	1,215	563	97	396	6	4
October	815	1,583	8	129	37	10	23
November	194	1,349	0	241	22	12	11
December	116	759	0	226	38	8	10

Table 2  
1985 Fish Processing Employment  
by Industry

	Total	Canning Curling	Fresh/Frozen Packaging
Annual Average	6,150	1,897	4,253
January	1,941	754	1,187
February	2,601	888	1,713
March	2,803	882	1,921
April	3,980	1,006	2,974
May	5,803	1,457	4,346
June	8,354	2,241	6,113
July	15,546	5,072	10,474
August	14,876	4,649	10,227
September	9,660	3,169	6,491
October	3,539	1,091	2,448
November	2,490	744	1,746
December	2,196	805	1,391

**Table 3**  
**Job Opportunities in Seafood Processing**  
**Estimated future Employment Levels for**  
**Select Occupations**

Select Occupations	1986 Employment	1991 Employment	Annual Growth
Butchers & Meatcutters	302	304	0
Cannery Workers	6,286	7,580	259
Supervisors, Misc.	181	197	3
Graders & Sorters	181	217	7
Meat/Fish Cutters - Hand	764	920	31

Note: Employment Services Activity data cover July 1985 to June 1986.  
 Note: 1991 occupational employment is estimated based on current staffing patterns within the industry.

**Table 4**  
**Alaska Department of Labor Job Service**  
**Job Orders and Average Wage Offered**  
**for Cannery Workers**  
**July 1985 to June 1986**

Job Service Office	Number of Openings	Hourly Wage
Statewide	7,571	\$5.60
Kenai	1,291	5.58
Ketchikan	1,062	5.59
Anchorage	704	5.12
Valdez	673	5.76
Homer	587	5.85
Seward	528	6.25
Kodiak	481	5.72
Petersburg	441	5.48
Sitka	367	5.95
Dillingham	184	5.31
Bethel	130	6.84
Juneau	89	5.63
Dutch Harbor	79	5.25
Glennallen	67	6.00

**Table 5**  
**Wage Rate Survey**  
**Data for Cannery Workers**  
**July 1986**

	Statewide	S.W. Region	Gulf Region	S.E. Region
Non Union Wages:				
Entry Level Average	\$5.66	\$5.59	\$5.72	\$5.62
High	8.66	6.00	6.10	
Low	4.30	5.40	4.50	
2 Yrs Exper Average	\$6.67	\$6.20	\$6.50	\$7.95
High	8.66	8.50	10.65	
Low	4.55	5.50	6.50	
Union Wages:				
Journeyman level	\$5.81	Regional data not available		

## Job Openings

Employment estimates for fish harvesting (Table 1) show the number of people working during a season. How many of the jobs are available because of crew turnover or the expectation of a good harvest is a point of speculation. No data base exists to quantify this. For fish harvesting there appears to be a surplus of inexperienced people and a sufficient number of experienced crew members with skills to meet the needs of the industry.

On the other hand, Job Service data on seafood processing show fewer applicants than job orders. Employment growth is expected to occur with additional jobs being created. Many people who work in seafood processing are placed by the Alaska Department of Labor's Job Service offices. Roughly 7,000 job orders were received from employers during the period July 1985 to June 1986 (Table 3). For cannery workers the greatest number of job orders were in Kenai and Ketchikan (Table 4). Over 700 job orders for cannery workers were processed through the Anchorage office, our state's largest urban center.

## Hiring Practices

For fishing boat crew members the hiring is done by individual boat owners. Success in finding a job depends upon the person and knowing when and who to approach. Often hires are accomplished by walking the docks and talking to individual skippers and other crew.

Boat owners prefer working with experienced hands, especially those they have signed on before. The most successful and experienced skippers have their choice of crew members. All persons working on a commercial fishing vessel are required to have a crew members license. The license is available through most vendors which issue sport fishing licenses. The fee for residents is \$30.

Many of the companies operating seafood processing facilities in Alaska are based outside the state. Some of the hiring is done in their offices in Seattle prior to the start up of the season. As described above, the Alaska Employment Service processes many job orders for seafood processing wor-

kers and there is a shortage of in-state applicants for these jobs.

### Wages

The usual arrangement in seafood harvesting is for crew members to share profits. Earnings will depend upon the size and type of the catch. An inexperienced crew member may receive a share as low as 6%, but most of the crew members receive shares ranging from 10% to 33%, depending upon their experience and the type of fishing being done. According to the Alaska Career Information System description for fish harvesting, over one-half of the fishing crew members earn less than \$5,000 per season and only about 10% earn more than \$20,000.

While boat crew members are paid on a percentage basis, seafood processing employees receive wages on an hourly basis. The statewide average entry level wage for cannery workers was \$5.66 during July 1986. The average wage for workers with two years of experience was \$6.67 an hour (Table 5). The wage rate for cannery workers varies depending upon the employer and location of the processing site (Table 6). Over \$112 million was paid in total wages by the food processing industry during 1985.

### Risks of Working in the Fishing Industry

The food processing industry, predominately seafood processing, has one of the highest rates of worker injuries and illnesses in Alaska. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration recordable injuries and illnesses in food processing was 32.5 cases per 100 full time equivalent (FTE) workers in 1985. This is nearly three times the private sector rate of 12.6 cases per 100 FTE workers for injuries and illnesses.

The time loss rate for workdays lost due to injury or illness for the food processing industry was 123 days per 100 FTE workers versus the 81 days per 100 FTE workers in the overall private sector. Table 7 contains a summary of the number of cases for time loss injuries and illnesses by the type of injury.

Over one-fourth of the total estimated work related illnesses in food

Table 6  
Alaska Department of Labor Job Service  
Job Orders and Average Wage Offered  
for Other Seafood Related Workers  
July 1985 to June 1986

Job Service Office Occupation	Number of Openings	Hourly Wage
Dillingham Misc. Fishing	20	\$11.63
Dutch Harbor Misc. Fishing	6	9.32
Homer Misc Fishing	10	7.42
Juneau Hand Packers	5	7.85
Ketchikan Hand Packers	5	6.10
Kotzebue Cutters & Trimmers	107	8.91
Misc. Fishing	3	12.65
Kodiak Cutting Machine Op	149	6.44
Hand Packers	30	6.15
Cutters & Trimmers	16	5.81
Misc. Fishing	21	6.53
Seward Cutting Machine Op	35	4.05
Testers/Graders/Sorter	15	5.85
Sitka Hand Packers	31	4.95
Valdez Testers/Graders/Sorter	18	4.50

Note: Job service offices and Occupations were selected for which the occupational classification would most directly be related and limited to seafood processing.

Table 7  
Injury Characteristics  
for Time Loss Injuries and Illnesses  
in the Seafood Processing Industry  
1985

Number of Case By Nature of Injury	# of Cases	% of Total
Sprains and Strains	286	35.4
Contusions, Bruises	158	19.5
Cuts, Lacerations	94	11.6
Fracture	68	8.4
Other	203	25.1
Total	809	100.0

processing in 1985 were skin diseases. Discussions with seafood processing employers indicate that dermatitis and contact allergy conditions are the most common occupational illness cases in the industry. As in other industries the leading cause of time loss injury are falls and overexertion, which result in back injuries.

Unlike seafood processing workers, fish harvesters are not covered under

the Alaska Workers' Compensation Act. Information on work related injuries in the fishing industry is not included in traditional statistical sources. There is, however, one source of data which gives information on injuries incurred by fish harvesters, the Alaska Fishermen's Fund.

The Alaska Fishermen's Fund was established in 1951 to provide for treatment and care of Alaska's licensed commercial fishermen who are in-

jured or become ill due to commercial fishing in Alaska. The total maximum allowance for any one injury or disablement cannot exceed \$2,500. No payments are made on expenses incurred over one year after the date of initial allowance.

Money to support the fund comes from 60% of each commercial fisherman's license fee. To be eligible for coverage, the injury or illness must directly relate to commercial fishing activities and the injury or illness must have occurred in Alaska or in Alaskan waters. Covered expenses include medical and hospitalization costs, pharmaceuticals, and some transportation costs. There is no death benefit for survivors of fishermen who die while fishing in Alaska.

Up to 25,000 people participate in fish harvesting during a year in Alaska with annual average employment of around 8,000. During state fiscal year 1986, the Fishermen's Fund office received 3,011 claims. Approximately one-third of the claims were filed by nonresident fishermen. During fiscal year 1986 the average benefit paid was \$362.29.

The available injury characteristic information from the Fishermen's Fund shows that 32% of fish harvester injuries are sprains. This is a lower ratio than the average for all other industries. The second leading injury for fish harvesters was "cuts, lacerations, abrasions, and punctures" which accounting for 19% of the total.

## Conclusion

The seafood industry offers job opportunities for the unskilled worker although the work is seasonal, low paying, and difficult. For individuals interested in job opportunities in seafood processing the place to start looking is the Alaska Department of Labor's Job Service offices. A joint effort between the processors and the Job Service offices has been underway to place as many Alaska residents as possible in seafood processing jobs. To find a job in the seafood harvesting end of the business is more difficult. Personal contacts and an individual effort offer the best chance to land a position as a crew member of a fishing boat.