

The Alaska Fishing Jobs Handbook

2008-2009 Edition

PREVIEW EDITION

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The Alaska Fishing Jobs Handbook

By the Staff of the Alaska Fishing Jobs Clearinghouse

FishingJobs.com

“Where Crews and Captains Click”

Don't forget your CrewCode and
Password. Jot them down here!

My CrewCode is:

My password is:

After reading this handbook, post your Crew Profile at FishingJobs.com.

A portion of proceeds from the sale of this handbook will be contributed to the United Fishermen of Alaska (UFA) and other advocacy groups representing the interests of the commercial fishing industry in Alaska.

All information provided is of a general nature and is not intended to address the circumstances of any particular individual or entity. Although AFJC endeavors to provide accurate and timely information, there can be no guarantee that such information is accurate as of the date it is received or that it will continue to be accurate in the future.

The Alaska Fishing Jobs Clearinghouse is an Internet-based infomediary service, not a hiring or placement agency. We disseminate general information to job seekers and relay contact information for job-seekers to prospective employers through our website.

In this handbook we stress the need for personal safety training and personal responsibility for all persons connected to the commercial fishing industry. We also emphasize the importance of well-crafted and carefully considered crew contracts. We are not liable for any damages or injuries arising from any commercial fishing operation, in Alaska or elsewhere. Neither are we responsible in any way for the actions of job seekers who may utilize our infomediary service, or for the actions of any employer who may choose to hire such a job-seeker.

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Foreword

Although this is not a big book, it contains information that took us years to learn, and that's why it's a bargain.

As much as we would like to, we cannot guarantee you will find your dream job on a fishing boat in Alaska. But we do guarantee that by posting your own Crew Profile and using the information contained in this handbook, you will dramatically increase your chances.

Among other things, this handbook

- ❖ tells you how to contact fishing boat captains: online, by mail and in person;
- ❖ backgrounds you on the risks and rewards of Alaskan commercial fishing;
- ❖ tells you how to plan your trip to Alaska, and the places along the way where you can find work on Alaska-bound boats;
- ❖ tells you exactly how to look for work, both in the Northwest and in Alaska, and
- ❖ tells you how to behave on a fishing boat once you find a job.

This book is a roadmap to adventure, but no two adventures are alike. You might be hired right out of the Captain's Area at the website. That is your first goal, and ours!

You may get a callback from the first captain you send a letter to, or the twentieth.

Maybe you'll find a job in Seattle or Bellingham, in May. Your chance could come walking the docks of Ketchikan in June. Or out on the rock—Kodiak Island—in July.

Everyone who ever went to Alaska was taking some kind of risk. For us, the risk paid off with unforgettable experiences – not all of them good, by the way – hard work and lasting friendships.

It is our sincerest hope that you can look back someday and say the same.

Be smart. Be safe. Good luck.

-The Crew at AFJC

P.S.: Now, read this book!



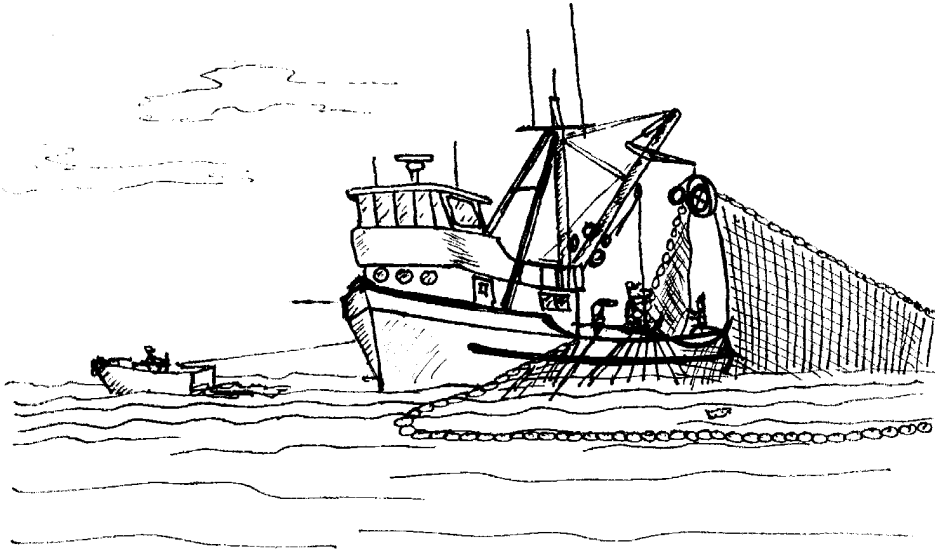
A halibut longliner heads north for the season, through Southeast Alaska

Longliners

A fleet of boats called longliners target halibut and sablefish (also known as black cod) from Southeastern Alaska to the tip of the Aleutian Islands. Since halibut and sablefish are deep-water fish, they are caught using baited hooks arranged along – appropriately enough – long lines stretched across the sea floor. Longline boats vary in length from 32' to over 100'. Some longliners are venerable old wooden boats of the schooner style, about 65' long. Longlining is a tradition-rich fishery, and with the possible exception of crabbing, longlining for halibut is probably the most physically demanding work to be found in Alaska's fleets. It is truly said of this fishery that "the boats are made of wood, and the men are made of steel."

Longlining is tough, but it can also be very lucrative, and it affords opportunities to see lots of different parts of Alaska. The season lasts from March to November, and a quota-system management regime of the halibut and sablefish fisheries provides captains with flexibility in timing their trips. By picking their "weather windows", captains can usually avoid taking undue weather-related risks.

In addition to longliners, draggers and crabbers, many other types of fishing vessels operate in Alaska. Although this handbook is organized around Target Fisheries that provide large numbers of entry-level jobs, your job search will cast a much wider net than that. Every captain licensed to operate in Alaskan fisheries can access your Crew Profile from our website. That's more than 12,000 captains.



A typical purse seiner “hauls gear.”

Life on a purse seiner

The maximum length for salmon purse seiners in Alaska is 58 feet. This is a state-mandated size limit meant to prevent excessive fish-catching efficiency among the fleet. Since the boats are relatively long and wide, they are usually quite comfortable. Purse seiners are readily distinguishable by their rigging. Purse seiners have a heavy mast, from which projects a boom, extending aft vertically and diagonally over the work deck. From the boom hangs a power block¹.

Purse seiners typically have a crew of five, including the captain. Everyone is expected to pitch in whenever and wherever there is work to be done, but certain specialized tasks usually, but not always, fall to crewmembers with prior experience.

The skiffman drives a high-powered work skiff, pulling one end of the purse seine net as it enters the water and corrals the catch. He² works closely with the captain, who communicates with him by radio about maintaining the “shape” of the net.

¹ Words that are underlined in your Handbook are defined in the [Glossary](#).

² Throughout your Handbook, we are using conventional masculine terminology. This is partly for convenience and to avoid grammatical awkwardness. We also choose this style however, because we have observed that a number of women we know who work in the industry refer to themselves as “fishermen,” preferring the traditional term to the more politically correct but seemingly less popular term, “fishers.” In any case, women comprise a growing percentage of the ranks of both crewmembers and captains. The staff at AFJC feels very strongly that the Alaskan commercial fishing industry is a better one because of these women, and we suspect that few in the fleets would disagree.

The engineer, usually a returning crewmember or a “greenhorn” with mechanical experience, is responsible for keeping the engines and machinery in good working order.

A greenhorn, by the way, is a new and inexperienced crewmember. Always remember that every crewmember and captain in Alaska was once a greenhorn.

Greenhorns are usually assigned the role of deckhand. Deckhands do a little bit of everything, and are expected to display initiative and a willingness to learn at all times. Stacking the net as it comes aboard; repairing the nets and other equipment as they wear and tear; pitching fish into the fish-hold; unloading the catch at the end of the day; standing wheel-watch and helping keep the boat clean are a few of the countless tasks that will be learned by the enterprising deckhand. Which brings us to:

AFJC Rule #1

There is no such thing as a stupid question.

So don't be afraid to ask. We know one captain who got hired as a greenhorn onto a purse seiner. He spent three days on board before locating the head. Do not be like him. Ask questions when you don't understand something. There is a lot of terminology and equipment unique to boats, and the sooner you learn port from starboard, the better.

No matter how enterprising the deckhand, however, there are certain skills that only come with time and practice. Wheel watch – that is, driving the boat – is a combination of boat handling and navigation that you won't learn overnight. For the first couple seasons, captains may only give you the wheel if there is a long, straight run to be made. More experienced crewmembers or the captain himself may take over when navigating gets tricky.

While you are in this learning phase, you should make extra effort in those areas where you can function easily. One way to think about this is by breaking the work on a fishing boat into two categories. One is the work of fishing. The other is the work of maintaining the boat and equipment.

The “greener” the crewmember, the more he should help in maintaining the boat. When you get back to town, be the first one onto the dock with the garbage bags. Take on more than your share of the dishwashing duties. Clean off the table and countertops. Coil lines carefully and neatly. If you see a piece of gear that could roll across the deck in heavy weather, secure it. Be on the lookout all the time for things that are out of place, then put them away. Don't wait to be told.

It usually falls to one of the deckhands to do double duty as the cook, although on some boats cooking responsibilities are shared. All purse seiners have large oil-fired ranges where most of the cooking is done. Some also have microwaves and other modern appliances, which make the job considerably easier than it might be otherwise. Even so, the old stereotype of an overworked and under-appreciated boat cook still has a bit of truth to it. Most crews and captains, however, recognize the importance of a good steady diet and are grateful to the person who dishes it up day after day.

On most seiners, crewmembers sleep in bunks in a common area of the cabin, near the bow, called the fo'c'sle (short for forecastle). On older seiners, the fo'c'sle is situated below-decks and forward of the engine room. Newer designs have the fo'c'sle on the main cabin level. The captain usually has a small private stateroom on the main cabin level.

Bunks vary in size from boat to boat, but they are usually adequate. A general lack of space is common to all fishing boats. Prospective crewmembers should bear this in mind when packing for their trip. More about this later.

The workday on seiners

Compared to crabbing and halibut longlining, a workday onboard a seiner or gillnetter is like a walk in the park. Depending on your previous experience however, it may be the most demanding walk you've ever taken.

On seiners and gillnetters alike, days are long. If fishery managers give the fleet a four-day opening, this means the fishery will be open for ninety-six hours straight. Your captain, unless he is very unusual, will always seek to maximize catch during openings. That means fishing from first light until dark.

On purse seiners the greatest part of the workday is given to the repetitive process of making sets. ("Set" is the term given to the process of laying out and retrieving the net, a process that is repeated many times each day.)

Most seining is done very close to shore, where schools of migrating fish appear in the greatest concentrations. While the crew checks the deck and equipment for readiness, the captain studies conditions of tide and current, light, wind and observable fish behavior to determine where he will make his set. At this point in the operation the skiff is attached to the seiner's stern, and the skiffman is at his steering station in the skiff, with the engine running in neutral. Arriving at his chosen spot, the captain signals the crew to release the skiff. Now released, and pulling one end of the net, the skiff turns and motors into position, usually facing and quite close to the rocky shoreline. The captain drives the seiner away from the skiff, and the quarter mile-long net pays out over the stern. As the last of the net slides off the seiner's stern, the captain slows the boat and begins

to tow slowly against the current on his end, holding the net in a generally semi-circular shape.

Both purse seine nets and gillnets are constructed in three main parts: a corkline along the top; the webbing (also called the mesh) of the net itself below the corks, and a heavy leadline at the bottom. The corkline floats on the surface of the water. The web hangs down in the water like a fence. At the bottom of the web, the weighted leadline keeps the “fence” hanging more or less straight in the water. (Gillnets are much smaller and lighter than purse seine nets. More on that later.)

The tow lasts about twenty minutes, during which time the crew throws any fish remaining on deck into the hold and hoses down the work area to clear it of seaweed and jellyfish. There are usually a few minutes to relax and grab a sandwich or cup of coffee during tows.

During the tow, the captain and skiffman are holding the net open so fish can swim into it. At the end of the tow, the captain tells the skiffman, by radio, to “close up.” Hearing this, the deckhands and the cook scramble back into their rain gear and gloves so they can “haul gear.”

The skiffman closes the circle of the net by driving alongside the seiner and handing off his end of the net to the deck crew. He then drives out under the towline attached to the seiner. Circling to the other side of the seiner, he attaches another towline to the “big boat,” which he will pull on with the skiff to hold the seiner in proper relation to the net as it comes back aboard.

When the net is “closed up,” it is hanging like a big circular corral in the water. The fish that swam into the net during the tow are now caught, but they can still escape by diving, since the bottom of the net is floating too, not resting on the bottom.

To prevent their escape, the crew “purses” it closed, using a large winch mounted on the seiner’s deck. Visualize a long drawstring closing the bottom of a giant, mesh bag. That’s what pursing is. Once underway, it is time for the net to come aboard.

The power block does the heavy lifting in a seine operation, pulling the net out of the water and over the deck. As the net passes through the power block it is then lowered toward the work deck, where two or three crewmembers stack it in a pile.

The fish come aboard in the last part of the net, and are emptied either onto the deck or directly into the hold. Hauling gear takes about 15 minutes for most seiners today. An efficient crew on a well-equipped purse seiner can complete 15 to 18 sets per day.

2008-2009 Target Fisheries



It is important to remember that the captains who have access to your CrewCode Profile operate not just in the target fisheries, but in every fishery in Alaska. You may hear from crabbers, halibut and sablefish longliners, sea urchin divers, shrimpers, cod fishermen or set-netters (salmon fishermen who set their nets out from the beach and sleep in cabins). But we focus on those fisheries that offer you the best chance of a job.

Bristol Bay Salmon Gillnet

On the map of Alaska, look to the southwest part of the state, where the Alaska Peninsula extends west toward Russia. Immediately north of the peninsula lies Bristol Bay, a large bay that opens to the Bering Sea.

Bristol Bay is home to the world's greatest natural run of sockeye salmon. Every summer, over a very brief window of time lasting about five weeks, millions upon millions of these beautiful, bullet-shaped six-pounders race home to their natal rivers and tributary streams.

About 1,200 permit-holders fish Bristol Bay, and each of them need two or three motivated crewmembers. That adds up to a lot of jobs in one of the most lucrative fisheries in the state, when measured by our "time-in-and-dollars-out" formula.

Bristol Bay jobs start in early June, and most captains are wrapping it up and putting their boats away by July 25th.

Sample Crew Profile #1

CrewCode: 49833

Name: Erika Lopez

Seasons Available: Summer

Email: elopez@colorado.edu

Profile: I am a twenty-four year old college graduate (University of Colorado; BA, Communications, 3.4 GPA). My hobbies include snowboarding and running. I am working as a barista/waitress right now, here in Colorado Springs, my hometown. I spend every spare minute outside, either on the slopes, running or just hiking with friends. So I'm in very good shape. I would like to hear from any Alaskan captain who catches a lot of fish! I'm a very hard worker, and I think I have a solid appreciation of what it takes to succeed as a crewmember in Alaska. If it all works out, I would be interested in coming back for more than one season. If you asked my friends they would tell you I am adventurous, easy to get along with, smart, with a loud laugh. I would be happy to provide references. Please e-mail me with any questions. I'll get back to you right away. Thank you!

Sample Crew Employment Contract

This contract is between John Doe Fisherman, operator of the F/V Fishing Boat (herein "Captain") and the undersigned individual, member of the crew of the F/V Fishing Boat , (herein "crewmember").

Captain and crewmember agree as follows:

1. Duration of Contract. This contract shall commence on _____, and shall continue until _____, or until such time as all gear is in and stored, and the Vessel and equipment are cleaned up, following the conclusion of the _____ season. The end of that season shall be the end of the voyage and the termination of crewmember's employment for unearned wage purposes. If crewmember is injured, he will receive unearned wages only until the end of the season.
2. Crewmember is hired to perform all normal and customary duties of a deckhand. In addition, crewmember agrees to assist in readying the Vessel and its gear in preparation for the commencement of the above referenced season as is customary in the industry and further agrees to perform any reasonable work, which is required by the Captain.
3. Compensation. Crewmember shall receive in full payment for all services, the following share: _____% of the Vessel's gross stock (based on grounds ticket price plus "price adjustments") after fuel and groceries have been deducted. In the cases of fuel expenses, each crewmember shall pay a percentage equal to his crew share percentage. Grocery expenses shall be divided evenly among the crewmembers and the Captain. Expenses begin at the time pre-season preparation commences. The compensation shall be paid no more than 30 days after the close of the fishing effort of the season. The share will be the sole compensation for the crewmember. All work performed by the crewmember in terms of making the Vessel ready for sea, repairs, and taking the Vessel out of service shall be paid for by the share and shall not entitle crewmember to extra compensation.
4. Independent Contractor. Although crewmember is a seaman for Jones Act purposes, he is an independent contractor for income tax, Social Security and withholding purposes.
5. Maintenance. If crewmember is injured, he will receive maintenance at the rate of \$18.00 per day.
6. Advances. Crewmember may be given advances not to exceed 50% of the Base Crew Share with the approval of the Captain.
7. Discharge. Crewmember will be subject to immediate discharge by the Captain in the event that he fails to follow any of the following rules.

- a) The use or transportation of drugs, including tranquilizers, is strictly prohibited on the Vessel.
 - b) Abuse of alcohol is prohibited on the Vessel.
 - c) Crewmember must conform to all reasonable health; safety, personal hygiene, and living standards set by the Captain and shall, in no circumstances, commit any action, which endangers the safety of other members of the crew of the Vessel.
 - d) Crewmember must live and work in harmony with other members of the crew.
 - e) Crewmember must meet all Vessel departure schedules.
 - f) One hundred percent effort is expected of crewmember at all times. Crewmember will perform any temporary assignment required by the Captain.
 - g) Misrepresentation by crewmember of previously acquired skills, experience and abilities to induce Captain to enter into this contract is prohibited.
 - h) Crewmember must capably perform the duties for which he has been hired.
 - i) No passengers will be permitted without Captain's specific approval.
8. Crewmember will be responsible for his own transportation expenses, if, for any reason, he chooses to leave the Vessel or is terminated for failing to abide by the conditions of employment.
9. Loss of Property. In case of loss of property in the event of Vessel loss, Captain will pay crewmember two hundred fifty dollars (\$250) for any and all personal property lost by crewmember. Any additional coverage desired by crewmember must be provided by crewmember.
10. Medical Condition. Crewmember agrees to submit a complete and truthful medical condition report to be provided by Captain and further agrees, prior to commencement of Season, to undertake a physical examination by competent medical personnel at the option, direction and expense of the Captain.
11. Safety. Crewmember is responsible for providing and maintaining a survival suit for his sole use.

The undersigned have read this contract and agree to its terms:

DATED THIS _____ DAY OF _____, 20____.