

# FISH HARVESTER PERSPECTIVES ON FISHING SAFETY AND HEALTH DURING COVID-19 ONLINE SURVEY

*ONLINE SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS*

*OCTOBER 2021*



**NL-FHSA**  
FISH HARVESTING  
SAFETY ASSOCIATION



## SUMMARY

1. 240 fish harvesters (operators, skippers and crew) based in Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia completed an anonymous online survey.
2. A majority of respondent fish harvesters (61.3%) indicated they had no safety concerns while fishing during the COVID pandemic in 2020.
3. The main safety concerns identified included contact with people outside the crew during offloading and other activities and challenges with social distancing while onboard.
4. Harvesters identified sanitation, the creation of crew bubbles and distancing from shore crew as practical prevention options and social distancing and use of PPE during fishing, modification of eating/rest areas and reduced crew as impractical.

## CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic was confirmed by the World Health Organization in March 2020. The announcement came shortly before the planned opening of multiple small and medium-scale fisheries in Atlantic Canada involving thousands of harvesters, and around the time of the first outbreaks of COVID-19 in the region. Given this context, there were both concerns and requirements to reduce the spread of the disease, strong economic pressures to allow fisheries to proceed, and limited advice or information on how or if the fisheries could proceed safely. Industry associations worked with Public Health and occupational health representatives to develop and disseminate safety guidance to help fishing operators and crew meet their obligations under federal and provincial safety regulations during this unprecedented health challenge. After some delay fisheries, like other forms of food production work, were deemed essential and allowed to proceed once Guidelines were in place.

Key guidance for fishing operators to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission included:

- Creating and maintaining a ‘bubble’ on the fishing vessel in addition to individual/household isolation in between fishing trips;
- Maintaining physical distance from other workers (shore workers, etc.);
- Other control measures including monitoring for symptoms before, during and after trips; use of personal protective equipment (PPE); vessel and personal hygiene, etc.)

## SURVEY DESCRIPTION AND GOALS

This report provides a high level description of findings from an anonymous on-line survey of Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia fish harvesters. The survey was developed by Dr. Emily Reid-Musson, Dr. Joel Finnis and Dr. Barb Neis at Memorial University of Newfoundland, with funding from the Ocean Frontier Institute and analysis/reporting support from Dr. Maria

Andree Lopez Gomez (MUN). It was designed in collaboration with representatives from the Newfoundland and Labrador Fish Harvester Safety Association (NL-FHSA), the Fish Food & Allied Workers Union (FFAW/Unifor) and the Newfoundland and Labrador Professional Fish Harvesters Certification Board (PFHCB) and was distributed by PFHCB in NL, by the Fisheries Safety Association of Nova Scotia and by the PEI Fisheries Association. Survey design was approved by Memorial University's Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research.

The goal of the FISH HARVESTER PERSPECTIVES ON FISHING SAFETY AND HEALTH DURING COVID-19 online survey was to document harvesters' perspectives on COVID-related concerns and precautions during the 2020 fishing season after the season was over and prior to the start-up of the 2021 season. Commercial fish harvesters who had fished between February and September 2020 were eligible to participate, including operators, skippers and crew.

In reviewing the results, it is important to keep in mind that during the spring of 2020, fisheries livelihoods in Atlantic Canada, like those elsewhere, were negatively impacted by a rapid drop in demand for fish and fish prices associated with COVID-19-related restaurant closures and difficulties with the cruise ship industry (a major customer) and access to shipping globally.

The survey sought to shed light on:

- a) harvesters' main fisheries in 2020;
- b) their perceptions of risk while engaging in these fisheries during COVID-19;
- c) the precautions they took to reduce/prevent disease transmission;
- d) how these precautions related to their own concerns about COVID-19 disease transmission; and,
- e) their assessments of the practicality of the different recommended precautions, given the conditions associated with working on board small and medium-sized vessels.

## **SURVEY QUESTIONS AND RESPONDENTS**

The survey was developed using the on-line survey program *Qualtrics*. There were 35 survey questions covering respondent demographics (age, gender, province where they fished, etc.), fishing activities in 2020 (vessels, gear, primary and secondary species fished), their COVID-19 related concerns while fishing, their assessment of the practicality of safety measures, and information on how COVID-19 might have affected other fishing safety concerns.

We report findings from participants who completed at least 80% of the survey. In total we report on 240 participants. Of those who responded:

- most were male (80.8%);

- most were owner-operators, either exclusively or partially (60.4%); remainder were crew;
- most (82.9%) were based in Newfoundland with the remainder from Nova Scotia;
- most fished from small-scale <65 foot vessels.

The most common primary species fished by respondents in 2020 were snow crab, lobster, and cod. The most common secondary species fished were cod, crab and capelin. Primary species were mostly fished in longer vessels (> 45 feet) and decked vessels (66%, n=158). Secondary species were more likely to be fished in smaller (<35 ft.) and undecked vessels (n=32). For primary species, 87% (n=139) of decked vessels had onboard sleeping accommodations.

In 2020, most respondents fished in spring (81.3%, n=195) and summer (50%, n=120); most (61.7%, n=148) spent a day or less on fishing trips for their primary species.<sup>1</sup>

## SURVEY RESULTS

- **WHAT WERE YOUR MAIN COVID-RELATED SAFETY CONCERNS WHILE FISHING IN 2020?**
  - 'I had no COVID safety concerns while fishing' – 61.3%, n=147
  - 'My COVID fishing safety concerns were related to fishing Species 1, Species 2, or BOTH species' – 38.8%, n=93

Seventy-nine participants responded to an open-ended question about their main COVID-19 related concerns. Of these, 43 were concerned about contact with other people outside the crew such as onshore workers, buyers and people that have contact with crew (i.e. crew's family members). Seventeen expressed concern about not being able to physically distance from other workers when fishing from the vessel. Some quotes included:

*“while off loading both the snow crab and the whelk you were never to sure where and who the long shore people were in contact with”*

*“you don't know where the other person has been”*

*“my only concerns were in regard to offloading thinking that with the movement around truck drivers, plant workers etc. that cases might show up...”*

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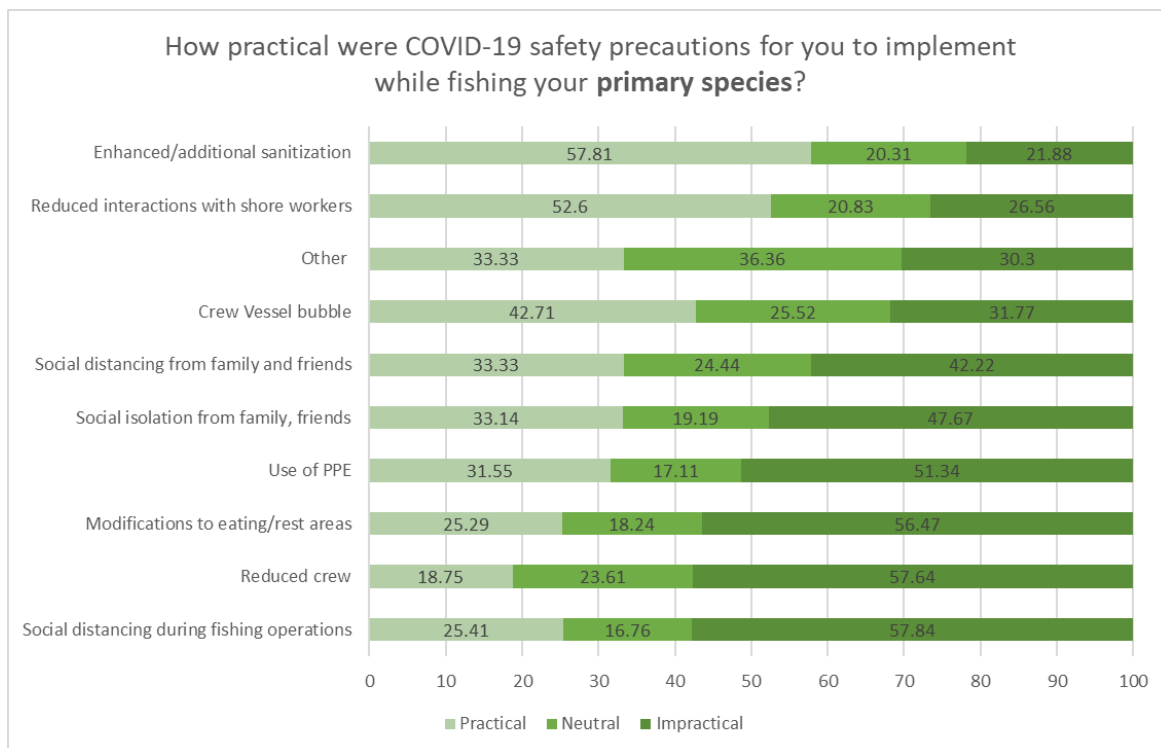
<sup>1</sup> Duration of fishing trips for primary species: 2.5% spent < 5 hrs; 23.8% spent 5-8 hrs; 35.4% spent 9-24 hrs; 20.0% spent 2-3 days; and 18.3% spent > 3 days.

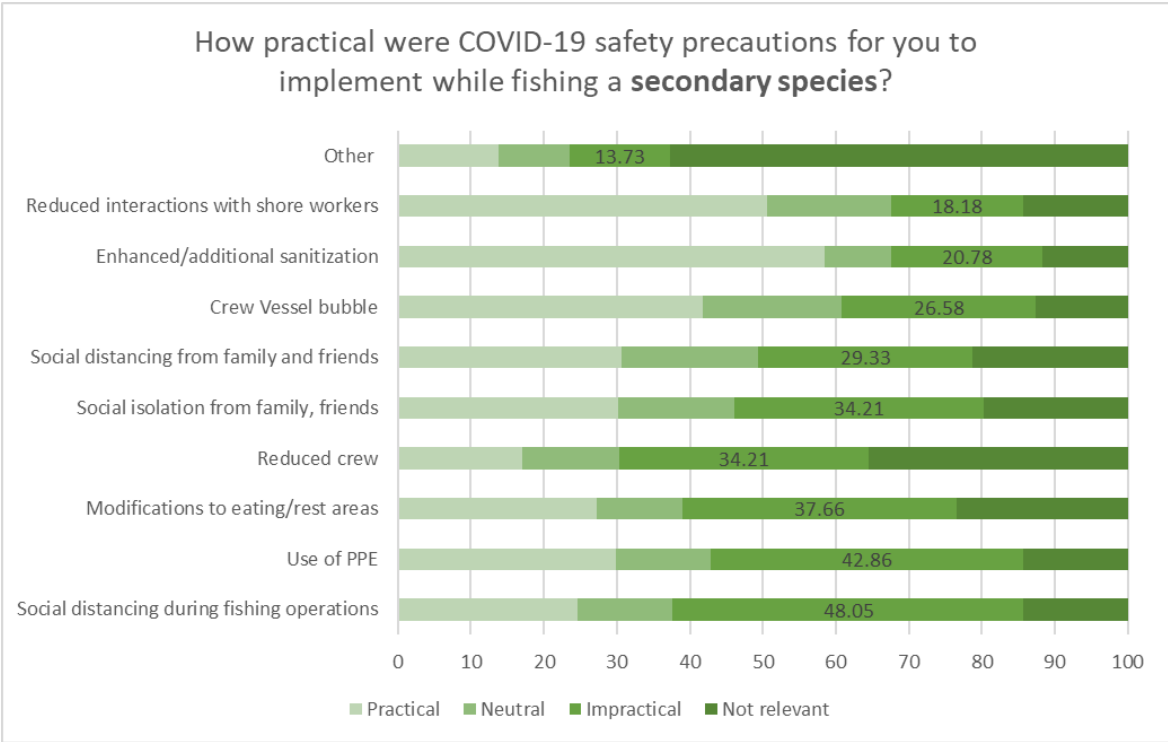
*“Staying free from the virus while fishing aboard a small boat and trying to distance ourselves as best we could”*

We did not find any relationship between having COVID-19 related concerns and factors such as gender, trip length, crew size, region, or with the presence or absence of sleeping accommodations on board their vessel for both primary and secondary species. We found differences between having COVID-19 related concerns and age (p-value<0.01). Forty percent of people who had concerns with COVID were aged 50-59 years and 28% were people above 59 years of age.

**‘HOW PRACTICAL WERE THESE COVID-19 SAFETY PRECAUTIONS FOR YOU TO IMPLEMENT WHILE FISHING?’**

Respondents were asked about the practicality or impracticality of specific safety precautions to reduce COVID-19 transmission, based on a Likert scale (Practical; Neutral – neither very practical or impractical; Impractical; Not relevant or applicable). The following table highlights the precautions respondents felt were particularly practical compared to those they felt were most impractical.





<b>SAFETY PRECAUTIONS THAT RESPONDENTS WERE MORE LIKELY TO FEEL WERE <u>PRACTICAL</u>:</b>	<b>SAFETY PRECAUTIONS THAT RESPONDENTS WERE MORE LIKELY TO FEEL WERE <u>IMPRACTICAL</u>:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhanced sanitization (57.8%)</li> <li>• Reduced interactions with shore workers (52.2%)</li> <li>• Crew/vessel bubble (42.7%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social distancing during fishing operations (57.8%)</li> <li>• Use of PPE during fishing trips (51.3%)</li> <li>• Modification to eating/rest areas (56.4%)</li> <li>• Reduced crew (57.6%)</li> </ul>

Between 20 and 25% of respondents indicated that every single mitigation measure was ‘impractical’, indicating possible resistance among some to any COVID-19 safety measure.

***‘DID THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE ON BOARD FISHING WITH YOU [FOR PRIMARY AND/OR SECONDARY SPECIES FISHED] CHANGE DURING THE 2020 SEASON DUE TO COVID-19?’ [NO CHANGE/ FEWER PEOPLE/MORE PEOPLE]***

Over 80% of participants (85% for primary species, 87% for secondary species) reported no changes to the number of people on board fishing with them during the 2020 season due to COVID-19. A smaller group of respondents (13.3% for primary species and 12% for secondary

species) reported fishing with fewer people on board. Less than 1% reported working with more people for both species.

***'IN YOUR VIEW, WHAT APPROACH TO THE FISHING SEASON DURING COVID-19 SHOULD AUTHORITIES TAKE? PLEASE RANK YOUR PREFERENCE (E.G., INDICATE '1' FOR YOUR FIRST PREFERENCE ON THREE OPTIONS: DELAY SEASON, CLOSE/CANCEL SEASON OR OPEN AS PLANNED ).'***

Respondents were asked about their views on sector-wide or fisheries-specific closures or delays in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, based on a ranked order question. Most respondents were in favour of 'opening as planned' (86%) with the appropriate protocols in place. There was a smaller group (26.9%) who preferred to delay the fishing season, and a small minority (7%) who indicated they would prefer authorities close/cancel the season.

Respondents were also asked to describe the reasons for their preferences in an open-ended question. Of the 76 people who responded to this question, the most common explanation for the preference to 'open as planned' was their concern about the impact on their incomes/livelihoods of fishing delays or closures (30%, n=24). Several respondents also noted that fishing work was 'essential work'.

***'AT ANY TIME DURING FISHING IN 2020, DID TAKING COVID-19 PRECAUTIONS AFFECT YOUR ABILITY TO FOLLOW OTHER FISHING SAFETY PRECAUTIONS (FOR EXAMPLE, HAVING AN ADEQUATE NUMBER OF CREW ON BOARD)? (YES; MAYBE; NO) PLEASE EXPLAIN HOW:'***

Eighty-six percent of respondents said that taking COVID-19 precautions did not affect their ability to follow other fishing safety precautions (e.g., having adequate number of crew on board). Four percent responded 'maybe' and 9% responded 'yes'. Those who indicated 'yes' or 'maybe' offered the following explanations for their views;

- Those with reduced number of crew to allow for social distancing still found that social distancing was difficult
- Reduced crew led to longer work hours and more fatigue ("Trying to do work with less crew")
- Masks got wet and restricted breathing