

Interviewee Name: Jessica Echard and Rebecca Weil

Project/Collection Title: Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Matt Frassica (Independent Producer)

Interview Location: Rockland, ME

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Interview Description:

Jessica Echard and Rebecca Weil, from Cooperstown, NY, both work for the Northeast Center for Occupational Health and Safety as a research assistant and research coordinator, respectively. Their main project has been working with fishermen to increase their use of lifejackets while fishing. They have focused on talking with fishermen about why they choose not to use lifejackets, what their concerns are, and how they can help improve lifejacket design to make them more appropriate for the job. In this interview, they discuss their research process and their stories from working with fishermen around safety issues, highlighting how important safety is to fishermen even if they choose not to use lifejackets.

Collection Description:

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Transcribed By: Molly Graham

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[0:17:56]

MF: Matt Frassica

JE: Jessica Echard

RW: Rebecca Weil

[00:00:00.00]

MF: These are some question prompts. We're really open-ended, so we don't have specific questions that we need to ask every one. It's Quaker-meeting style. If we could just start by having you guys say your names.

JE: Jessica Echard.

MF: And?

RW: Rebecca Weil.

MF: What kinds of things do you see going on in your community that are of concern to you?

RW: Well, we've been working to see if we can reduce deaths from falls overboard in commercial fishing, specifically with commercial lobstermen. That's what Jess and I have been working on.

JE: In Maine and Massachusetts.

MF: What does that work entail?

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RW: First, it's really understanding and listening to the fishermen to try and find out what the barriers and motivators are to wearing lifejackets and if we can understand from their perspective what they need, what their wishes are, what their goals are, then we can try and find things that might resolve what happens when a fall overboard occurs. That's the approach we've taken, is really just asking questions, trying out different lifejackets with fishermen, seeing what their thoughts are, what they'd like to change and then going out and looking for solutions. It's about involving the whole community, really, in finding solutions to something that affects the whole community when someone drowns, which is a horrible event. We're very aware of having heard many stories from people about deaths from falls overboard and how devastating it is for the families, but the whole community. We've been hearing those stories and then trying to respond.

MF: What kinds of explanations do you get for why lobstermen don't wear lifejackets?

[0:02:10.5]

JE: A lot of times it's comfort or that it gets in the way while they're working, or that it's an entanglement hazard. They're concerned that they'll get caught as they're working and pulled over. Over the last two years, we've been trialing various different models with them and trying to find out what they like, what they don't like, what's comfortable, and then working with manufacturers also to try to make adjustments or come out with new models that might answer some of those questions or concerns.

MF: What are the design modifications that you have made in response?

RW: Well, we haven't made any specifically ourselves—

JE: We haven't.

RW: —but the manufacturers are very responsive. They're trying to make changes. Really, the fishermen have asked for things that make perfect sense. They want things that are, as Jess said, comfortable, but that translates to less bulky. They don't want things that have straps and buckles and pockets and things that could catch on the traps or pull them overboard. They need to be able to move in these things, because they're working really hard for many hours, hauling traps. It needs to be something that gives them good range of movement and really doesn't get in the way. We've been looking for things like that. The manufacturers are in a bit of a bind right now because there's changing regulations for them, in terms of labels and harmonizing of standards between the US and Canada. So, to make changes typically it costs fifty to hundred-thousand dollars to change the simplest thing on a life jacket. It takes a long time to go through the approval process for them. They're very conscious of the things we've shared with them and they want to make changes. Some of them are already making those changes. Others are saying they need to wait for some of the standards to change. So, we're looking all around to see what we can find. Some of it's coming from other countries and some of it's coming from this country, but manufacturers have been incredibly supportive of understanding the needs of the commercial fishermen.

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MF: Do you have a sense of the numbers of how many fishermen wear life vests, how many don't wear life vests? Is there any reliable survey of that?

JE: I'm not sure that there's been very many surveys of how many don't. It's usually just talking with them and finding out that they don't or they prefer not to. I think when we started doing this and Rebecca worked on an earlier project and was talking with fishermen, it was that nobody wore them was what everyone said. Nobody wears them. Now, we hear more and more stories of guys—oh, there's this guy in my harbor, he always wears one. I think we're seeing a shift in that. As we go along, there's been a definite change in how people talk about them—well, we're talking with them about them—and the interest that we see.

MF: That change happened over how long?

RW: Even just the last few years.

JE: Yeah. [inaudible]

[0:05:17.3]

RW: If we look just at the forum, the first year people were pretty skeptical. They were like, “We hate lifejackets. We don’t want to wear them. They’re awful. They get in the way. They’re going to kill us.” Now, last year and this year, we’ve had phenomenal interest and real excitement. I’d say excitement would be a word. Today we had a beautiful story happen where we had a captain come up to us and say, “You saved our sternman. He, last February, was out on a boat and he was wearing the stormline flotation bibs that we had issued as part of our—

JE: Our study.

RW: —study to see what would work and what wouldn’t. The crew member was hauling on a line. The line broke. He flipped over, head over heels over to the side and in February water, pretty cold. They zipped the boat around. The captain got him, as quickly as they could, which was very fast. Even in that short period of time, he couldn’t move his arms and hands to swim and they said he would have drowned. He said it saved his life. He now wears them—that fellow wears them every day when he’s fishing. We’ve had a lot of people now anecdotally call us and say they’re now wearing the gearing that we tried in that trial, but this was the first one of someone saying, “Look, it saved a life.”

JE: Yeah, it saved a life.

[0:06:34.8]

RW: That was a really highlight for us to hear that it’s started to make a difference.

MF: How did you get into this?

RW: Go ahead.

JE: I just stumbled into it really. I didn’t know much about lobstering or about life jackets, and found this job and got into it. It’s been really exciting, really wonderful. It’s probably been the most fun job I’ve ever had.

RW: We love the people we work with.

JE: Yeah (laughter).

RW: I stumbled in it. The place we work is the Northeast Center for Occupational Health and Safety. NIOSH, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, has created centers across the country. We’re the northeast center. We cover Maine to West Virginia. What we work on is

all occupational health and safety, so trying to keep people able to do their jobs and stay alive and not get injured. It's in forestry and fishing and farming.

JE: And agriculture.

[0:07:35.9]

RW: I started out, actually, with the farming community, working on power take-off equipment and shielding for that to prevent injuries and deaths. Then, it just naturally segued into this work. I'm an occupational therapist by training. It's untraditional occupational therapy, but it fits. It's still about how do you help someone do the work they love and be able to do in the best way possible. As Jess said, this is one of my happiest jobs because we love working with the fishermen. It's a great group of people. Every day we're learning wonderful, new things. I think what we like about our work is sometimes research is studying people. We're not. We're listening to people. We get to listen all the time. We get to say, "Okay, how do we solve that? Here's a problem. What do we do?" It's a big jigsaw puzzle of responding to what people's needs are. They know best. We don't. We don't have the answers. They do. We like that. Makes it interesting.

MF: Did you find talking to fishermen about safety issues was different from talking to people who worked on farms?

[0:08:45.6]

RW: There's a lot of overlap.

JE: Yeah, there is. I work on a project with loggers in Maine, as well. There's a lot of similarities in how each group talks about safety or the concerns that they bring up. We talk about it in the office a lot because it's how they survive, but it's their life as well. It's not just their job. It's something they love. They want to keep doing it. They're justifiably concerned about things that come in and change that. They don't want to have something that makes it harder for them to do what they love or enjoy what they do. I think that's what we find a lot.

MF: Is there a fatalism about the occupational hazards of fishing that you have to overcome?

RW: I think that's often spoken about, but I would say, not really. I think that's the portrayal that gets put on it, but when you actually speak with people, they want to be alive, they want to get home, they want to see their family. They're not out there trying to die. Jess and I get heated about this sometimes because people are often saying, "Oh, they're risk takers. Oh, they just want to die. Why aren't they wearing that? They're stupid." We're like, "No, actually they have a lot of good reasons for not doing this." They want to be alive. They want to get home.

[0:10:21.5]

JE: Yeah. I wouldn't say that—

RW: That they're fatalistic.

JE: —they're fatalistic about it at all. In fact, I'd say a lot of them are very aware of it and are very conscious of wanting something to fix it or a solution to a problem they can't find yet. I think it's the opposite.

RW: They're very aware of the risks. When you get talking to somebody, yeah, they might not be wearing a life jacket that day, but they're probably doing ten or twenty other things that are highly safety-aware. They're making sure that engine works really well. They're making sure their crew is safe and knows things. They're looking at what they're doing. They're watching the weather.

JE: Yeah, very.

RW: There's so much that goes into every day. It's not just about a life jacket. Safety is a very multifactorial thing. It's very complex. We see people making a lot of good a lot of good choices and being very aware.

JE: And coming up with a lot solutions on their own.

RW: Yeah, very innovative.

JE: Amazing changes to their boats just to make them safer.

MF: What about other issues in the community or other issues affecting the waterfront or the industry that you've observed that are not necessarily to do with safety?

RW: That's a big question. There's so much that they're working with right now. The change in the oceans. The changing regulations for all the fisheries. The issues with the right whales. It's huge for people in the lobster community.

JE: Pricing.

RW: Pricing. Cost of living.

JE: Bait.

RW: Bait. There's so much happening that's challenging. I don't even know where you begin to answer that question. There's so much.

[0:12:09.2]

MF: Are there things that you have noticed in your own communities that are changing to do with the water or to do with the coast?

RW: Well, we're in a funny situation. We're not coastal. We drive over to the coast to do our work, but we're actually in farming country. But there's lots of changes there happening (laughter).

MF: Talk about those changes.

RW: All of the things that we just listed for fishermen, the farmers are experiencing, too. So, pricing issues for them are really hard. A lot of them are going out of business. A lot of farms are in foreclosure and selling all their cows. They're really challenged.

JE: It's a big struggle there too.

MF: This is dairy farming?

RW: Yes. Yeah.

JE: We work with a mix of farmers out there; some that just do hay, some that are doing livestock, some that do dairy, and some that do vegetable farming. All of them, across the board, have—we've seen an uptick in the struggles they've had in the last year or so, in particular, and dairy, in particular, has been hit really hard with the dairy prices. They've been struggling with that.

[0:13:25.0]

RW: We know one issue that our organization is about to start trying to work on in the fishing community is sleep deprivation, which is really largely gone unlooked at. There's an effort to see how to address that, how to evaluate the impacts of that on safety and health. That will be a new area to be looking at. It's been well-examined in other fields, but not in fishing and yet, it's something that's spoken about a lot as an issue.

MF: Yeah. You'd think just given their hours that fishermen would have trouble with sleep deprivation.

RW: Yeah.

JE: Yeah.

MF: Sometimes they're going out to fishing grounds way offshore. They're motoring all night. What about other stories that you've heard or things you've encountered in your travels that you'd want to pass on?

[0:14:23.5]

JE: I think in relation to what we've been working on for the last two years with this life jacket problem, we've had some really positive stories come back to us. We had a captain down in Massachusetts who started out, wasn't at all interested in life jackets, didn't want his crew

wearing them, thought they were a hazard, a danger for them. Then, agreed to help us out anyway and try a life jacket, and turned around in less than a year, a year, he had a policy on his boat where his crew's required to wear life jackets now. That was a big change for us, a great change and a very nice forward movement. We've had stories like that, which are really positive and wonderful to hear.

RW: We've heard a lot of heartbreaking stories of loss and captains not being about to pull their crewmen back on board and having them drown right in front of their eyes. Those are really hard—

JE: Yeah. Those are hard to hear.

RW: —for people to live with. We hear them and really hold them as very precious stories. Then we hear people talk to us about their close calls that they've survived. What's beautiful about those is often they're telling us, "Now I want a life jacket," and, "Now I'm ready." We're feeling optimistic with the stories we're hearing.

[0:15:59.4]

MF: There was a story that I read in the *Press Herald*, I think a couple months ago, about a fisherman who was at the dock and he was just cleaning up his deck. He went over and he was alone on his boat. He floated under the dock. Somebody spotted him from another dock. Somebody who was working, doing something else, noticed this happen and called the fire department. The fire department went and got the guy. If that second guy hadn't seen it all go down, the guy overboard probably wouldn't have been able to get out from under the pier. Would have been a good customer for you guys (laughter).

JE: Yeah.

MF: Great. Anything else on your mind or issues facing—even not to do with the coast, but things going on in Maine that are of concern to you?

[0:17:21.3]

RW: Actually, instead of saying what's concerning to me, I think this project is very heartening—listening to all the voices of the Maine coast and the fishermen particularly. Capturing this is going to be really beautiful work. Thank you for what you're doing.

MF: Well, you're welcome. You should check out Galen's website, The First Coast. Actually, you know what? I'll give you a card.

RW: Great.

[0:17:56]