

## **Extracts from the NTSB Conception Report on the Fire on the Small Passenger Vessel CONCEPTION, September 2, 2019**

NTSB/MAR-20/03 PB2020-101011

### **Executive Summary NTSB CONCEPTION Marine Accident Report**

<https://www.nts.gov/investigations/AccidentReports/Reports/MAR2003.pdf>

### **Accident**

About 0314 Pacific daylight time on September 2, 2019, the US Coast Guard received a distress call from the Conception, a 75-foot-long small passenger vessel operated by Truth Aquatics, Inc. The vessel was anchored in Platts Harbor on the north side of Santa Cruz Island, 21.5 nautical miles south-southwest of Santa Barbara, California, when it caught fire. When the fire started, 5 crewmembers were asleep in their bunks in the crew berthing on the upper deck, and 1 crewmember and all 33 passengers were asleep in the bunkroom below. A crewmember sleeping in an upper deck berth was awakened by a noise and got up to investigate. He saw a “glow” outside. Realizing that there was a fire rising up from the salon compartment directly below, the crewmember alerted the four other crewmembers sleeping on the upper deck.

The captain was able to radio a quick distress message to the Coast Guard. Crewmembers jumped down to the main deck and attempted to access the salon to assist the passengers and crewmember in a bunkroom below the main deck but were blocked by fire and overwhelmed by thick smoke. The five surviving crewmembers jumped overboard. Two crewmembers swam to the stern, re-boarded the vessel, and found the access to the salon through the aft corridor was also blocked by fire, so, along with the captain who also had swum to the stern, they launched the vessel’s skiff and picked up the remaining two crewmembers in the water. The crew transferred to a recreational vessel anchored nearby where the captain continued to radio for help, while two crewmembers returned to the waters around the burning Conception to search for possible survivors.

The Coast Guard and other first responder boats began arriving on scene at 0427. Despite firefighting and search and rescue efforts, the vessel burned to the waterline and sank just after daybreak, and no survivors were found. Thirty-three passengers and one crewmember died. The surviving crew were transported to shore, and two were treated for injuries. Loss of the vessel was estimated at \$1.4 million.

### **Probable Cause**

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the accident on board the small passenger vessel Conception was the failure of Truth Aquatics, Inc., to provide effective oversight of its vessel and crewmember operations, including requirements to ensure that a roving patrol was maintained, which allowed a fire of unknown cause to grow, undetected, in the vicinity of the aft salon on the main deck. Contributing to the undetected growth of the fire was the lack of a United States Coast Guard regulatory requirement for smoke detection in all accommodation spaces. Contributing to the high loss of life were the inadequate emergency escape arrangements from the vessel’s bunkroom, as both exited into a compartment that was

engulfed in fire, thereby preventing escape.

## **Safety Issues**

The safety issues identified in this accident, some of which have been identified in previous accidents involving passenger vessels, include the following:

- Lack of small passenger vessel regulations requiring smoke detection in all accommodation spaces. In accordance with the fire safety regulations applicable to the Conception in Title 46 Code of Federal Regulations Subchapter T, the only compartment that was required to be fitted with smoke detectors was the passenger bunkroom, since it was the vessel's only overnight accommodation space.<sup>1</sup> The Conception was equipped with two modular smoke detectors in the bunkroom—one mounted on the overhead of each of the port and starboard aisles. The Conception had no smoke detectors anywhere in the main deck salon area where crewmembers reported seeing the fire. The nearest heat detector was well forward in the galley, a deck above the bunkroom, and was not intended to be utilized as a fire detector for the entire salon. Additionally, all detectors aboard the vessel only sounded locally. Although the Conception met the regulatory compliance for smoke detectors in the bunkroom where the passengers and crewmember slept, the fire above them in the salon would have been well developed before the smoke activated these detectors.

## **Relevant Recommendations (Extracts)**

### **To the US Coast Guard**

Revise Title 46 Code of Federal Regulations Subchapter T to require that newly constructed vessels with overnight accommodations have smoke detectors in all accommodation spaces. (M-20-14)

Revise Title 46 Code of Federal Regulations Subchapter T to require that all vessels with overnight accommodations currently in service, including those constructed prior to 1996, have smoke detectors in all accommodation spaces. (M-20-15)

Revise Title 46 Code of Federal Regulations Subchapter T and Subchapter K to require all vessels with overnight accommodations, including vessels constructed NTSB Marine Accident Report x prior to 1996, have interconnected smoke detectors, such that when one detector alarms, the remaining detectors also alarm. (M-20-16)

### **To Truth Aquatics, Inc. (The Owners and Operators)**

Implement a safety management system for your fleet to improve safety practices and minimize risk. (M-20-23)

## **Recommendation Reiterated in this Report**

**As a result of its investigation of this accident, the NTSB reiterates Safety Recommendation M-12-3, which is currently classified as “Open—Unacceptable Response”:**

**To the US Coast Guard** Require all operators of U.S.-flag passenger vessels to implement SMS, taking into account the characteristics, methods of operation, and nature of service of these vessels, and, with respect to ferries, the sizes of the ferry systems within which the vessels operate. (M-12-3)