



# Trump cuts threaten safety training for workers in America's most dangerous jobs

By Thomson Reuters

🕒 May 31, 2025 | 6:42 AM

By Leah Douglas

NEWBURYPORT, Massachusetts (Reuters) – By the time Robbie Roberge spotted the fire consuming his boat's galley last August, he knew he had just minutes to evacuate his beloved Three Girls fishing vessel, named for his daughters.

As the flames spread up the boat's walls, he helped his crew into safety suits, deployed a life raft and made a mayday call to alert nearby mariners and the U.S. Coast Guard that he was abandoning ship more than 100 miles offshore.

Roberge, a commercial fisherman from South Portland, Maine, learned how to handle such an emergency just three months earlier at a workshop held by Fishing Partnership Support Services, a nonprofit that has trained thousands of East Coast fishermen in safety practices.

On May 20, Roberge cut a fishing trip short to bring the six-man crew from his remaining boat, the Maria JoAnn, to another FPSS training in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

"I have years of experience, but not dealing with emergencies," said Roberge, whose handling of the fire led to a successful rescue with no injuries. "I make it a point to be here."

Such safety trainings – aimed at fishermen, loggers, farmers and other workers in America's most dangerous jobs – could be scaled back or wound down entirely as soon as July, according to Reuters interviews with a dozen health and safety experts and organizations, as a result of President Donald Trump's drive to slash the size and cost of the federal government.

Those cuts have fallen heavily on the federal government's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services that is a key funder of workplace safety training and research.

#### WINDING DOWN

The Trump administration on April 1 terminated about 875 of the roughly 1,000 employees at NIOSH, including most of the staff who provide technical advice and support to a dozen Centers for Agricultural Safety and Health focused on fishing, farming and logging workers.

Although Trump this month reinstated about 300 NIOSH employees, they do not include the office overseeing the centers, according to data compiled by government worker unions seen by Reuters.

Reuters spoke to staff at seven of the centers who described preparations to close down when their current funding cycles run out in the coming months.

J. Glenn Morris, director of the Southeastern Coastal Center for Agricultural Health and Safety at the University of Florida, said his team had already begun winding down work in anticipation of losing their NIOSH grant on September 29.

"We're shutting down the direct education to the workers, we're shutting down the research," he said.

NIOSH funding for the Alaska Marine Safety Education Association's fishermen safety trainings could run out as soon as July 1, said executive director Leann Cyr.

FPSS also expects to lose NIOSH funding in September, potentially leading it to cut back on trainings, said Dan Orchard, the group's executive vice president.

The loss of the trainings could put more burden on federal marine rescue services when fishermen face emergencies at sea, said John Roberts, an FPSS instructor who spent 31 years in the Coast Guard doing search and rescue.

"The return on investment of the government is huge," he said. "If they give us this money to do this training, it's going to lessen how much money has to be spent to rescue the untrained."

Asked to comment on the NIOSH job cuts, an HHS spokesperson said: "The work will continue. HHS supports America's farmers, fishermen, and logging workers."

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., said in March that the staff reductions are necessary to reduce bureaucracy and improve efficiency and that NIOSH would be combined with other sub-agencies into a new Administration for a Healthy America.

The scope of the impact on these centers and their potential closures have not been previously reported.

## RISKY WORK

The nation's 442,000 fishing, farming and logging workers make up just a fraction of America's workforce, but they have the highest fatal injury rate of any U.S. occupation – 24.4 per 100,000 workers in 2023 or seven times the national average, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

These workers do dangerous tasks from rural outposts where it might take hours to receive medical care. Fishermen risk falling overboard. Farmers and farmworkers could be crushed by equipment or contract bird flu. Loggers face chainsaws and falling limbs.

That fatality rate has decreased over the last 20 years, BLS data show, with advances in mechanization and tightening federal safety regulations.

Safety research and training supported by the centers have helped improve outcomes as well, said Matt Keifer, professor emeritus of occupational safety at the University of Washington, who has worked for two of the centers.

Reuters could not verify the total number of workers trained by all of the centers, but the Northeast Center for Occupational Health and Safety in Cooperstown, New York, trained more than 5,600 workers in 2024, said director Julie Sorensen.

Some industry groups offer safety training without federal funding, like the Professional Logging Contractors of the Northeast, which hosts 11 annual trainings on equipment and worksite safety, according to executive director Dana Doran.

In addition to worksite risks, the NIOSH-funded centers and programs often tackle mental health challenges, drug addiction and diet-related disease.

In the fishing sector, for instance, opiate addiction is a significant enough concern that fishermen at the FPSS training were taught to administer the overdose reversal drug Narcan.

Staff at the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health at the University of Iowa have trained rural healthcare providers on risks farmers might face, like hearing loss from exposure to loud noises, said director T. Renee Anthony.

Erika Scott, deputy director of the Northeast Center, set up mobile health clinics at logging sites with the PLC to research high rates of hypertension among the state's 3,000 loggers.

It took years to convince loggers of the importance of public health research, said Doran.

"We've built that trust together. And that trust will potentially be lost," Doran said.

## 'LEFT BEHIND'

At the FPSS safety training, more than 50 fishing captains and crew learned to put out fires, make mayday calls, plug leaks, and deploy safety suits.

Attendees cheered each others' efforts to light flares and use water pumps and traded stories of nightmarish near-misses on slippery decks or sinking boats.

For Al Cottone, a fourth-generation fisherman in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and a FPSS instructor, cuts to the trainings would be "tragic."

In the decade he has been involved with FPSS, Cottone said the number of attendees at an average training has doubled to 40 to 50 from 20 to 25.

"There are so many people who are going to be left behind, because getting this in the private sector, this type of training, it costs a lot of money," he said.

(Reporting by Leah Douglas in Newburyport, Massachusetts; Editing by Richard Valdmanis and Suzanne Goldenberg)

## Comments

### Leave a Reply

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

**Aspirus Wausau Emerge**

41m ago

**Wells Fargo's long road to lifting \$1.95 trillion asset cap**

4h ago

**CrowdStrike forecasts d**

4h ago