

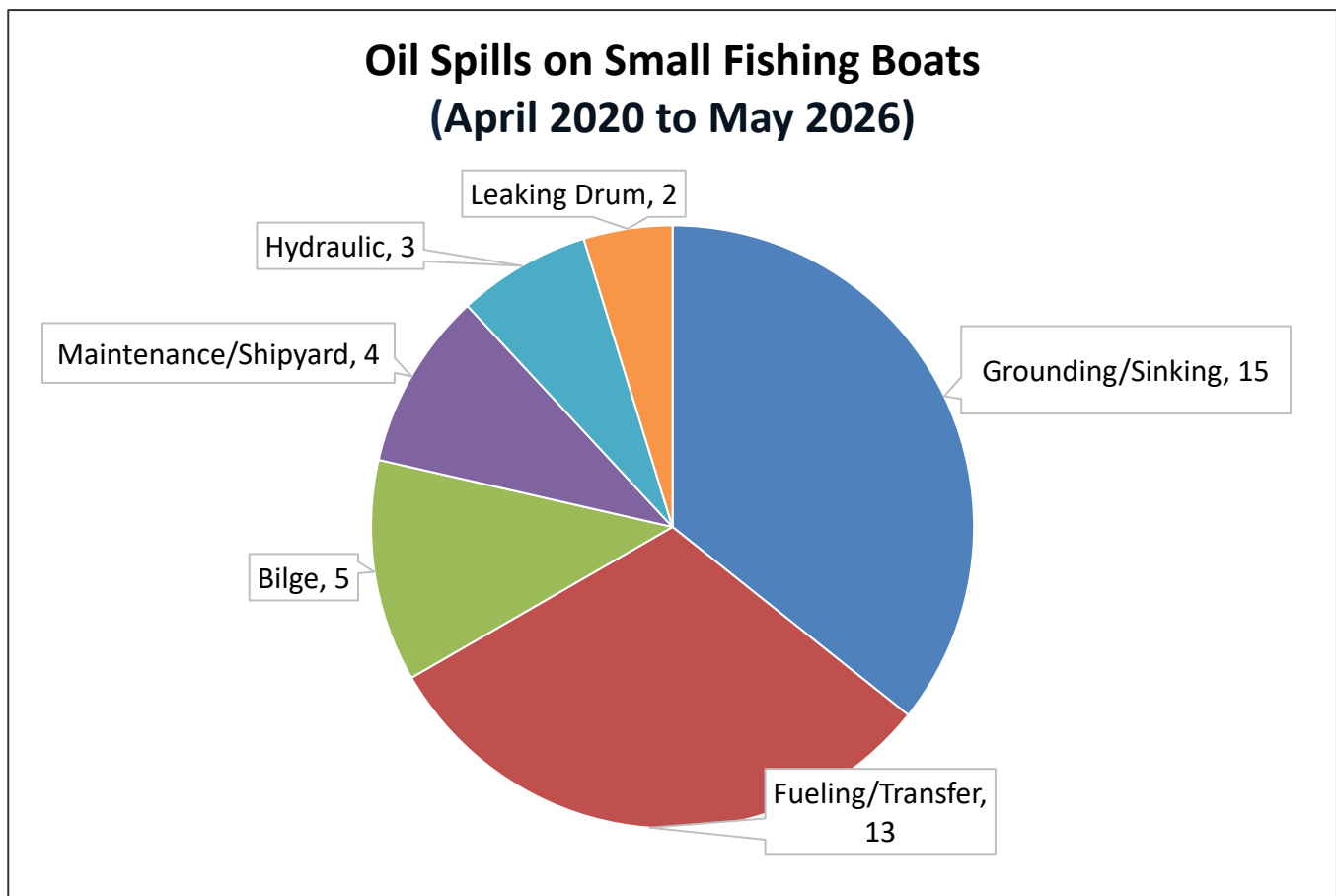


Oil spills from small fishing boats (under 300 GT) in Washington State from April 2020 to May 2026

The Washington State Department of Ecology investigates oil spills to develop spill prevention recommendations. This focus sheet reviews the causes of the 42 oil spills from small fishing boats that occurred from April 2020 to May 2026, and provides recommendations on how to prevent similar spills.

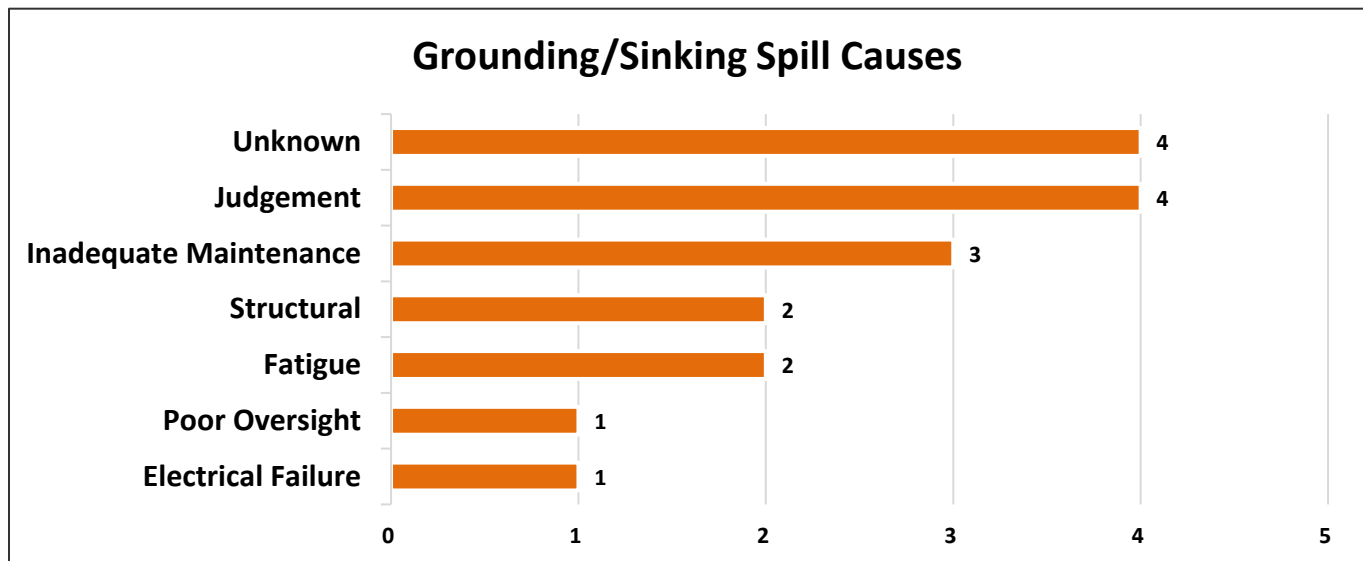
6-year review of spills from small fishing boats

There were 42 oil spills from small fishing boats into Washington waters from April 2020 to May 2026. These small fishing boats were all less than 150 feet long. The average vessel size was 70 feet in length. Most of the spills took place in the Seattle area (15), followed by Westport (9), and Bellingham (5). Out of these 42 spills, 15 occurred because of a grounding or sinking event, and 13 occurred during a fuel transfer operation. The remaining 14 spills resulted from incidents during maintenance or shipyard work, bilge pumping, hydraulic spills, and leaking drums left on the boat deck.



Grounding or sinking spills

Investigations show that groundings and sinking were caused primarily by poor judgment and inadequate maintenance. Fatigue, poor oversight, and electrical and structural failure were also factors.



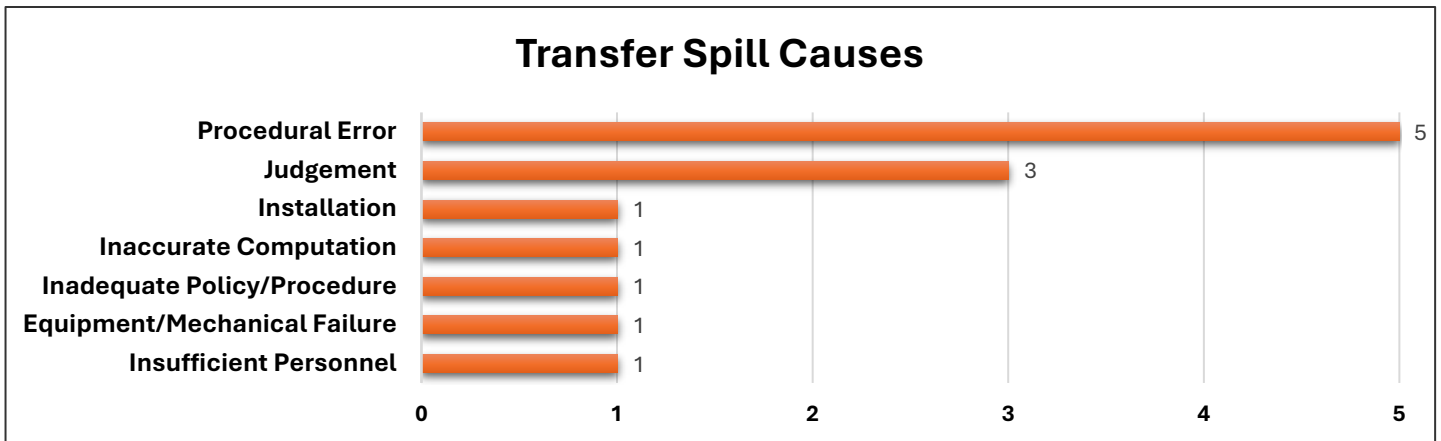
Grounding or sinking example: One local incident involved a fishing vessel that departed from Alaska for Washington, making around 7 knots. The captain of the boat was the only watch stander. During the 89 hours he was underway he stopped twice to rest, once for four hours and a second time for two and a half hours prior to the vessel running aground. The captain admitted to falling asleep at the helm for an extended period due to inadequate sleep over the previous three to four days.

Grounding or sinking – Prevention recommendations

- Regularly inspect critical systems and equipment that provide watertight integrity.
- Increase the frequency of inspections below the waterline, with particular attention to areas showing corrosion, signs of water intrusion, or any irregularities in hull integrity.
- Ensure regular maintenance and oversight during periods of extended layup, when there is no crew staying onboard. Ensure the hull and decking remain watertight and that bilge systems are operable.
- Physically test all bilge pump and alarm float switches weekly. Verify that each float moves freely and activates the pump. Ensure the area around the float is clear of debris and inspect all wiring to confirm it is watertight.
- Check bilges regularly for excessive water, fuel, or oil leaks and debris that could clog the bilge pump.
- Ensure the crew is adequately rested. Maritime safety standards recommend 10 hours of rest in any 24-hour period.

Transfer spills

Investigations showed that procedural error and poor judgement were the leading causes of oil transfer spills on small fishing boats. Equipment failure, insufficient personnel, inadequate policy or procedure, inaccurate computation, and incorrect installation were also factors.



Transfer spill example: One local incident involved a fishing vessel that experienced a spill when they failed to follow their fuel transfer procedures by exceeding the planned final tank level and going roughly seven minutes past their stop point before the spill occurred.

Transfer spill prevention – General recommendations:

- Verify the accuracy of your sounding tables. Sounding tables should include calculations for trim.
- Label the tank vents and valves in the oil transfer system so it's easy to correctly identify them.
- Try to keep the vessel on an even keel during fueling operations. Excessive list while fueling increases the risk of tank burps.

Fuel transfer spill prevention – Actions prior to each transfer:

- Before adding fuel to a tank, make sure you know the current tank level and clearly identify the level at which you intend to stop filling.
- Ensure crew is rested prior to the transfer.
- Verify the line-up of the transfer system before starting the transfer.
- Verify that the tank high level alarms are working properly.
- Block freeing ports and scuppers to prevent spilled oil from reaching the water.
- Ensure bunker connection flange is clean, a new gasket is installed, and bolts are tightened.
- Ensure all fuel oil tank vent containment areas are free of debris.
- Mechanically plug fuel-oil tank vent fixed containment, including the vents for every tank in the fuel oil system. Use vent bags for containment when tank vents do not have fixed containment.

Transfer spill prevention – Actions during each transfer:

- Continuously sound the tanks receiving fuel and actively monitor all other tanks in the transfer system. Excessive trim or list can affect the accuracy of sounding tables or sight glasses.
- Monitor the transfer rate and compare it to the planned rate. If there is a discrepancy, immediately investigate.



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