

Six out of ten aquaculture workers are worried that their job is affecting their health, finds survey

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A fish farm worker pictured here preparing to count salmon lice at a facility located along the Trøndelag coast. Credit: Trine Thorvaldsen/SINTEF Ocean

The 1,283 workers in the aquaculture sector who have responded to a recent HSE survey are not anxious without good reason. In all, 62% have experienced "near misses" in the last two years. However, there is another threat that is making them even more worried.

Researchers into [occupational safety](#) have been studying the results of a comprehensive HSE [survey](#) in an attempt to uncover problematic areas in a sector that employs 7,000 workers and that carries a statistically high risk of injury.

The survey demonstrates that strain injuries come top of the list among the [health problems](#) that most [aquaculture](#) sector workers are concerned about. Of the 62% who are worried that conditions in their working environment may have a negative impact on their health, 33% say that accidents are the cause.

Strain injuries are identified as the greatest threat to their health by 47% of workers. Lifting that involves bending or twisting of the upper body, as well as heavy lifting in general, combined with repetitive and monotonous tasks, all represent ergonomic risk factors familiar to all those who carry out traditional operations in the aquaculture sector.

Many changes

"Now that the aquaculture sector is undergoing furious development, with the accelerated introduction and use of new technologies, there is a need to keep a close eye on the impact this is having on HSE issues," says Senior Research Scientist Trine Thorvaldsen, who has been coordinating the work carried out by SINTEF Ocean and NTNU to complete the first major HSE survey in the aquaculture sector in seven years.

"A worker's day-to-day tasks are changing all the time in response to the introduction of new vessels, new net pen designs and, in the not too distant future, the installation of fish farm facilities in exposed areas far offshore," she says.

"The working environment experienced by aquaculture workers seldom

serves as a driver for change or innovation. This in spite of the fact that the technology itself may hold the key to reducing risk," say Thorvaldsen. It is her experience that both workers and union representatives in the sector believe that surveys of this type should be carried out more often.

"The prevention of work-related absenteeism and worker defection from the industry is in everyone's interest," says Thorvaldsen. "We believe that updated status reports are invaluable in support of the continuous HSE-related work being carried out by aquaculture companies, shipowners, suppliers and the public authorities," she says.

Lack of collaboration is a threat

Thorvaldsen explains that the survey has given researchers the opportunity to evaluate what has been happening in the sector since the last study was carried out in 2016. It has also been their aim to obtain insights into the interplay between independent shipowners and the aquaculture companies.

"Many of the respondents to the survey are employees in companies that serve as external service providers to the aquaculture companies," says Thorvaldsen. "The survey has revealed that as many as 66% of these workers believe that a lack of collaboration with the aquaculture companies represents a threat to their [safety](#). And as many again say that demands for efficiency stipulated by these companies mean that sometimes workers have to breach safety procedures," she says .

"This is very similar to trends we recognize in the construction and oil and gas sectors," says Trond Kongsvik, who is a Professor at the Department of Industrial Economics and Technology Management at NTNU, and who has been collaborating on the HSE survey. "In these sectors, it is not unusual for so-called sub-suppliers to work under

alternative regulatory frameworks, making their employees more vulnerable to accidents than those working in the core businesses," says Kongsvik.

A vulnerable sector

It is worth noting that half of all of the respondents to the survey had been absent from work as a result of some form of illness or injury during the last twelve months. A reported 17% said that the illness or injury that caused their absence was work-related, and 42% of these workers were absent for six weeks or more.

The report was part of a larger project that was also studying analyses of occupational accident statistics. Such analyses have shown that the rates of work-related injuries and fatalities in the aquaculture sector are high compared to those in other sectors. The Norwegian Labor Inspection Authority has recorded in excess of 34 accidents to individuals per year in the period 2011 to 2022. Falls, collisions with objects and crushing/trapping accidents are the most commonly recorded incidents.

...but job satisfaction is high

Even though the [survey data](#) are showing that many respondents have experienced work-related absenteeism, and that some are very worried about their own health and safety, as many as 88% say that they very often or always enjoy a high level of job satisfaction.

"Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that it is an individual's day-to-day working relationships that determine whether he or she experiences enjoyment in a general sense, and in our experience, this seems to be the case for very many," says Thorvaldsen. "They highlight their good

colleagues and their interest in aquaculture as the most important reasons for their high levels of satisfaction.

"However, these factors can be tempered by challenges linked to major work-related operations, such as delousing. Work-related stress and risky situations often arise during such operations, and these emerge in the responses to questions addressing the extent to which production is prioritized ahead of safety considerations," she says. Responses to the survey also indicate that safety is closely linked to the prevailing regulatory framework, organization and management.

For example, 29% of respondents said that considerations relating to production took precedence ahead of safety, while 30% responded that they felt uncomfortable pointing out breaches in safety regulations. And 22% of respondents maintained that they sometimes felt under pressure to work in ways that threatened their safety, while 16% said that they experienced group pressure to work in contravention of safety advice.

"These results highlight issues on which stakeholders working in the sector should be focusing their attention," says Thorvaldsen. "Actors may already be aware of some of the findings that are presented in this report. Other findings may be new to them. We want to encourage all those involved in the sector to use the report actively as part of their internal HSE activities with the aim of evaluating the status of their own [working environment](#)," she says.

More information: HSE in aquaculture—risk management in various forms of production (in Norwegian). www.sintef.no/prosjekter/2023/...e-produksjonsformer/

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