Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Airboat capsized and sank; no injuries

Date: June 17th, 2025

Location: Chugach National Forest, Cordova Ranger District

Note from the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center

While this incident did not occur in a wildland fire context, its story and lessons are applicable to wildland firefighters who regularly operate in and around airboats specifically and boats of all types as part of normal work in the wildland fire environment.

"…the current was pulling them behind us and further away at several knots." Captain, F/V Enchantress

Background

The Cordova Ranger District (CRD) Fish Crew was conducting field work in the Controller Bay area Southeast of Cordova on June 17th, 2025. This was a joint project with the Wild Salmon Center (WSC) aboard the F/V Enchantress, a chartered seine vessel. The project required the use of an FS owned and operated airboat for travel up the greater Bering River system at the head of Controller Bay. The F/V Enchantress transported the airboat and crew of five from Cordova harbor to Controller Bay the morning of June 17th and was to act as a floating base camp for the crew during the planned 6-day trip.

Cordova Ranger District staff operating an airboat like the one that capsized in Controller Bay.

Incident details

The crew of five departed the F/V Enchantress in the airboat at approximately 1200 on 6/17/25 to conduct field work within the greater Bering River system. They visited several pre-determined field sites throughout the afternoon and returned downriver toward the F/V Enchantress at approximately 1700 for the ~1-hour run. As the airboat was nearing the seine vessel in Controller Bay, the waves and sea state had increased from what they experienced when they left Controller Bay around noon. Winds on the return trip gusted to approximately 15-20 knots from the west-southwest. The sea state in Controller Bay was approximately 1.5-2' according to the crew.

The airboat operator reduced power and came off step approximately 100-150' from the F/V Enchantress to moor up for the night. The reduction of power and coming off step caused the bow to dip, allowing an initial wave and bow wake to inundate the airboat. This initial wave caused the airboat to become very heavy and further reduce the freeboard (the height of a vessel's side between the waterline and the top rail). A second wave came over the bow which pitched the airboat to the starboard side, dumping all five passengers into the water. The airboat proceeded to sink and was entirely under the water within 15 seconds of taking the first wave. Note: the bilge pump was operational but overwhelmed by the amount of water, leaving it useless.

Rescue/ recovery details

The captain onboard the F/V Enchantress noticed the airboat coming across Controller Bay and witnessed the above events. Once the passengers were in the water, he immediately threw four buoys in the water and toward the crew for them to use as

The F/V Enchantress, a 56' seine boat acted as base camp and support vessel for the FS fish crew.

floatation. He commented that "the current was pulling them behind us and further away at several knots." The captain instructed his first mate to grab a life ring and keep eyes on the swimmers as he started both engines on the F/V Enchantress and pulled anchor as quickly as possible. With the anchor up, the captain stated "… I could see they (swimmers) had all rafted together which made me feel very good about the rescue of everyone." Within 1-2 minutes of sinking, the F/V Enchantress maneuvered toward the five swimmers who at this point were all rafted together and able to grab ahold of 2 of the 4 deployed buoys. Once aside the swimmers, the captain was able to establish verbal communication, asking if there were any injuries. With an answer of "no injuries", he threw a raft into the water and tied it off to the F/V Enchantress offering "for anyone to hold on or climb in" as he rigged his starboard picking boom into the life ring to extricate swimmers. The captain and first mate then hoisted the swimmers one at a time onboard the F/V Enchantress. From capsizing to having all 5 onboard was approximately 5 minutes.

Once all five crewmembers were onboard, they removed wet clothes and were re-warmed and monitored for shock and other injuries by the F/V Enchantress crew. The FS crew lead contacted Chugach Dispatch and updated their chain of command on the incident and status of the crew. The F/V Enchantress pulled anchor and searched the area in a grid pattern, using sonar to look for the sunken vessel. While searching for the airboat several dry bags floated up and were recovered but they were unable to locate the airboat. The Enchantress gave up on the search and dropped anchor around 2230 for the night.

"… I could see they (swimmers) had all rafted together which made me feel very good about the rescue of everyone."
Captain, F/V Enchantress

Successes

- Swimmers were able to maintain calm and not panic. The crew leader (with the most boating experience) took control of the situation and crew members followed his directions to raft together once in the water.
- The swimmers were able to fall back on their training and raft together, making recovery much easier for the seine boat captain to maneuver to a single location and pick everyone out of the water.
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) was all worn and contributed to zero injuries or fatalities. PPE included USCG approved Type III float coats and full-face motorcycle style helmets.
- The experienced seine boat captain provided an incredibly fast and efficient rescue to get all swimmers out of the water within 5 minutes of the airboat capsizing.
- Communication by the airboat crew to Chugach Dispatch and chain of command was timely and appropriate.

Lessons learned

- Operating an airboat in deep water (marine or lake) is a higher risk activity that requires mitigations to reduce the risk of capsizing.
  - Minimize weight to the extent possible (gear and people).
  - Reevaluate go/ no-go decision prior to entering deep water bodies based on weather, sea state, weight and balance, operator experience, etc.
  - Minimize the number of trips needed across deep water bodies with an airboat by using other watercraft. (E.g.: open skiff, zodiac or reposition larger vessel in or closer to a river outlet.)
  - Operators must be extremely cautious when coming off step to anticipate a dip in the bow and subsequent bow wake.

- Before committing to entering deep water, make a radio call to other vessels in the area for a weather and sea state update to inform a go/ no go decision.
- During boat operations, ensure communication devices are attached to your person and waterproof to the extent possible.
  - The airboat crew had a full complement of communication devices to include multiples of each of the following: FS radio, satellite phone, InReach device, cell phone. All were either lost or damaged because of the airboat sinking.
- Utilize in-helmet communication technology
  - In-helmet comms will aid in clear, concise and timely communications where hand signals fall short, particularly with training new operators.
- Ensure vessel is rigged in such a manner that if there were a capsizing, appropriate safety gear will surface.
  - The airboat had a hard foam throw ring onboard, but it never surfaced after the capsize.
- Purchase and utilize high visibility colors (orange, yellow, bright green) for dry bags.
  - Several hours after the capsizing, the crew was able to spot and retrieve several high vis dry bags.
- With concurrent camp plans and float plans open, Dispatchers and field crews must be crystal clear with communications as to when a float plan is open/ closed vs. a camp plan being open/ closed.
  - Chugach Dispatch received a call from the airboat crew at 1652 (via sat phone) for their "evening check-in". Dispatch understood this as the float plan was closed and the crew was back to the seine boat for the night, meaning the crew was effectively not being float-followed at the time of the accident.
  - Field crew called Chugach Dispatch at 1850 (after hrs.) to close the float plan and inform Dispatch of the situation, and that everyone was safe and accounted for.
- Re-familiarize Chugach Dispatch staff with Chugach National Forest Emergency Response Guide and communication protocol for field incidents that require upward reporting.
  - Chugach Dispatch and the crew's chain of command were notified of the incident in a timely manner, however the communication from Dispatch to supervisors and line officers, as outlined in the Emergency Response Guide did not take place.

The facts, successes and lessons learned in the wake of this incident were documented and discussed through written statements, interviews, and a formal after-action review with all involved parties. Though this incident resulted in the loss of equipment, there were no injuries or loss of life; this can be attributed to crew training, the use of PPE and the quick and appropriate actions of the airboat crew and the crew onboard the F/V Enchantress. Thank you to the crew and dispatchers involved in this incident for openly sharing their experience for future boat operators, dispatchers and crew members to learn from.

This RLS was submitted by:

Graham Predeger
Chugach National Forest
Safety and Health Manager

Do you have a Rapid Lesson to share?

Share Your Lessons