

MO-2024-201

Passenger vessel Fiordland Navigator, grounding in Doubtful Sound 24 January 2024



Transport Accident
Investigation Commission

NB: The below is a brief plain English summary of key points in the report. The Commission's report speaks for itself -- you can download the full document here: www.taic.org.nz/inquiry/mo-2024-201.

Briefly: This report is relevant to safety-critical workers, sole-charge operators, medical certificate holders, safety managers, auditors, regulators, maritime educators, and all industry bodies that represent organisations whose staff may be in sole charge of safety-critical heavy machinery.

- Cruise vessel ran aground after fatigued master fell asleep at helm.
- Safety issues for the sector: fatigue management, monitoring of medical fitness, risk controls for sole-charge masters.
- TAIC recommends Maritime NZ improve awareness of ongoing medical fitness responsibilities for seafarers.



The Fiordland Navigator. File shot supplied by operator.

What happened

On 24 January 2024, the Fiordland Navigator ran aground while making a turn in Doubtful Sound. The vessel had nine crew and 57 passengers on board. Several people received minor injuries, and the vessel was moderately damaged. The crew responded well to the emergency, safely evacuating passengers to Deep Cove, then to Te Anau that evening. The vessel returned to Deep Cove that night.



Composite image: a marine chart superimposed on a Google Maps terrain shows the ship's course towards impact with the fiord mountainside

Why it happened

The master almost certainly fell asleep at the controls due to workload-induced fatigue. The master was very likely fatigued from long work hours, which weren't monitored or effectively managed. The operator's safety system didn't track actual rest hours or properly identify or mitigate fatigue risks for sole-charge masters.

While the master had a valid medical certificate, but medical fitness isn't just a one-time check. There was no system to assure ongoing medical fitness during the two-year certification period. The vessel's Senior Launch Master, responsible for safety procedures, had too much work to effectively oversee fatigue management.

Safety issues and recommendations

The Commission identified four key safety issues:

1. **Medical fitness standards:** Seafarers may not fully understand their responsibilities to report medical conditions affecting their fitness for duty. **TAIC recommends** that Maritime NZ improve awareness and enforcement of medical fitness standards.

No need for TAIC recommendations on three further issues because the vessel's operator RealNZ has mitigated the risks:

2. **Fatigue management:** The operator's fatigue-management system didn't prevent fatigue. Operator has updated its fatigue policy, introduced new training and monitoring measures, and improved work-hour tracking.
3. **Sole-charge master risk:** RealNZ hadn't properly identified or mitigated the risks of having a sole-charge master. Operator has added a second person to the wheelhouse during navigation and reinstated the Master's Assistant role.
4. **Safety management oversight:** The person responsible for day-to-day safety oversight was overburdened, making risk management less effective. Operator has created a Maritime Resource Planner role and adjusted management responsibilities to improve oversight.

What we can learn

- **Medical fitness** should be continuously monitored, not just at certification.
- **Workload** and actual rest hours must be properly tracked and managed.
- **Sole-charge masters** pose a safety risk if fatigue is not addressed.
- Safety systems need **enough staff** and resources to function effectively.

No repeat accidents – ever!

The principal purpose of the Transport Accident Investigation Commission is to determine the circumstances and causes of aviation, marine, and rail accidents and incidents with a view to avoiding similar occurrences in the future, rather than to ascribe blame to any person. TAIC opens an inquiry when it believes the reported circumstances of an accident or incident have - or are likely to have - significant implications for transport safety, or when the inquiry may allow the Commission to make findings or recommendations to improve transport safety.

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