



UNITED STATES COAST GUARD
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

MARINE SAFETY ALERT

Inspections and Compliance Directorate

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Washington, DC

Safety Alert 11-16

Dangerous Bycatch from Bygone Days
Discarded Munitions Remain a Present-Day Hazard!

This safety alert addresses the extreme hazards that exist today caused by discarded munitions that were dumped at sea long ago. They remain a significant risk to commercial fisherman, those operating dredges, and others who trawl and work the ocean floor. In a recent event, a deckhand on a clamming vessel was severely burned when a canister was dredged up and brought onboard along with rocks, clams, and debris. The canister likely contained mustard gas or some other type of blistering agent.

The canister itself did not appear to be leaking as there were no visible odors, evidence of discharge, or sounds of escaping contents. After the rocks and the munitions canister were sorted out from the catch and discarded a crewmember discovered he had been exposed to some sort of hazardous substance. Several hours later he developed severe blisters and burns over multiple parts of his body. The vessel then returned to port where he was admitted and treated at a local hospital.

Mustard gas is a chemical weapon developed during World War I. Millions of pounds of this product and many other chemical weapons, bombs, torpedoes, artillery shells, and munitions were routinely disposed of at sea in U.S. coastal waters. Many of these munitions dump areas are well charted with warnings posted on navigation charts. Nevertheless, there are numerous other areas where such munitions may be found that are unmarked. There is also evidence to suggest that munitions were frequently "short dumped," meaning dumped outside of the designated areas by contractors hired to take them to the intended locations.



Munitions found on sea floor. (CDC image)



Approximate 12 lb. Mustard Gas Shell (CDC image)

The Coast Guard previously issued a safety alert ([06-10, June 2010 link](#)) on this same topic and continues to **strongly recommend**:

- Persons involved in commercial fishing industries review their navigational charts to ensure that the areas in which they are trawling are not near labeled “Explosives Dumping Areas.” Such areas must be given wide berth and fishermen should recognize that bottom surfaces change and objects can move from original disposal areas;
- Review the [Maritime Industry 3R Explosive Safety Guide](#); follow and understand its recommendations; and
- Report any discovery immediately to the **National Response Center** at **1-800-424-8802** for proper response. (Alternatively, the USCG may be notified via channel 16.)

This safety alert is provided for informational purpose only and does not relieve any domestic or international safety, operational, or material requirements. Developed by the Coast Guard Fishing Vessel Safety Division and Office of Investigations and Casualty Analysis. Questions or comments may be sent to HQS-PF-fldr-CG-INV@uscg.mil.
