



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Study on Institutional Improvements to Secure Foreign Crew Members in the Fishing Industry

Myeong-Hwa Jung · Chan-Yeop Park · Jung-Mi Lee · Choi Soon ·
Kyung-jun Cho

Korea's fisheries industry is facing a severe labor shortage due to demographic shifts and population aging. Statistics Korea data indicate that the fishing household population declined from 170,000 in 2010 to 83,963 in 2024, representing approximately a 50% reduction, while individuals aged 60 and above accounted for 67% of the total fishing household population. New domestic labor inflows have essentially reached their limits, intensifying structural risks to the sustainability of fishing production capacity.

Under these circumstances, foreign fishing crew members have become an essential labor force for Korea's domestic fishing industry. While demand for foreign workers continues to grow across coastal and offshore fisheries, current employment systems are limited to short-term stays and repeated worker replacements. This constrains skills accumulating and long-term settlement within

the industry. As a result, skilled crew members frequently leave due to visa expiration, leading to accumulating burdens on vessel owners, including increased retraining costs and disruptions in the transfer of technical skills.

In this context, this study empirically examines the labor supply and demand structure in Korea's fishing industry and proposes policy directions to improve the foreign fishing crew employment systems. Based on quantitative estimates of domestic fishing crew demand and Korean labor supply, demand for foreign fishing crew is projected to reach approximately 40,000 by 2035 and 41,000 by 2045, with over 90% of this demand concentrated in coastal and offshore fisheries. In contrast, new domestic entrants through the fisheries education system - including fisheries high schools and fisheries-related colleges and universities, as well as the Ocean Polytechnic and returning fisher programs, remain extremely limited and are insufficient to offset the rapid retirement of existing crew members. This indicates that maintaining fisheries labor supply through domestic workers alone is unsustainable, making expanded utilization of foreign workers an inevitable necessity.

The study examined responses from other domestic industries - such as agriculture, livestock, and shipbuilding - as well as major foreign countries that have already experienced similar structural challenges. Based on SWOT analysis, it established strategies for securing foreign fishing crew and organized policy directions into three key implementation pillars.

First, this study suggests the need for a shift in foreign fishing

crew policy from a recruitment-centered approach to one focused on skilled workforce development. To achieve this, this study proposes establishing career development systems for foreign fishing crew, creating models to attract foreign students to fisheries high schools, supporting visa conversions for skilled workers, and developing ODA projects to strengthen crew capacity in developing countries.

Second, the study suggests the need to strengthen the legal and institutional foundations for ensuring a stable supply of foreign fishing crew. Proposed measures include establishing a legal basis for transferring responsibility for the management of foreign workers in the fisheries sector under the Employment Permit System from the Ministry of Employment and Labor(MOEL) to the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries(MOF), introducing a labor inspection system for fishing crew, and developing concrete measures to protect the human rights of foreign fishing crew.

Third, the study proposes strengthening cooperation between central and local governments to support settlement of foreign fishing crew. This includes introducing region-specific fisheries visas and providing enhanced support to local governments that pursue immigration policies.

To operationalize these policy directions, this study presents a phased implementation roadmap. Short-term measures focus on building institutional foundations and stabilizing labor supply. Mid-term measures expand infrastructure for working conditions, human rights protection, and settlement support. Long-term

measures aim to establish foreign fishing crew as skilled, permanently settled workers through formal legislation.

Concerning legislative enactment and revision, the study proposes establishing the (tentative title) Act on the Improvement of Working Standards and Welfare Enhancement for Fishing Crew to structurally address labor shortages in the fishing industry and secure a stable supply of foreign fishing crew. To reinforce educational frameworks for foreign fishing crew, partial amendments to the Regulations on the Designation and Operation of Employment Education Institutions for Foreign Workers are proposed, including expanding foundational competency training in the fisheries sector from two to minimum of six hours. In addition, the study proposes amending the Ministry of Justice's Guidelines for the Operation of the Region-Specific Visa Pilot Program to address regional depopulation and labor shortages. Specific recommendations include adding fisheries as a pilot sector and establishing new provisions to support the roles of the local governments.

Finally, the study proposes the creation of a Region-Specific Fisheries Skilled Worker Visa (E-7-5) by amending Annex 1 of the Enforcement Decree of the Immigration Act. This new visa category is intended to address limitations of the existing Region-Specific Skilled Worker Visa (E-7-4R) and more effectively reflect the unique working conditions and employment characteristics of the fishing industry.

From an organizational perspective, the study proposed establishing a Fishing Crew Division within the Fisheries Policy

Bureau of the Ministry of Oceans Fisheries to enhance labor supervision and enhance the effectiveness of foreign fishing crew policy. This division would integrate management of labor, welfare, visa, and education policies for fishing crew - including foreign crew - working on vessels under 20 tons. By clearly separating and specializing policies for maritime crew and fishing crew within the Ministry, this organizational reform is expected to enable more systematic workforce management, more effective recruitment, and sustained improvements in working conditions in the fishing industry.