

Draft 2021 Annual Deployment Plan for Observers and Electronic Monitoring in the Groundfish and Halibut Fisheries off Alaska - PCFMAC Briefing

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Introduction

The draft 2021 Annual Deployment Plan (ADP) describes how the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) intends to assign at-sea and shoreside fishery observers and electronic monitoring (EM) to vessels and processing plants engaged in halibut and groundfish fishing operations in the North Pacific. NMFS is preparing the draft 2021 ADP for presentation to the Council in October. This briefing paper was prepared for the Council’s Partial Coverage Fisheries Monitoring Advisory Committee (PCFAC) to enable the committee to discuss and provide recommendations on NMFS’s sampling design for at-sea deployment of observers and EM in the partial coverage category in 2021.

Summary of 2020 ADP and modifications due to COVID-19

NMFS released the final 2020 ADP with the following strata and deployment rates:

- No Selection – 0%
- Trawl – 20%
- Hook-and-line – 15%
- Pot – 15%
- Fixed-Gear EM – 30%
- Trawl EM EFP–100% at-sea EM; plus: 30% shoreside monitoring in GOA or 100% shoreside monitoring in BS

Starting in March, 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic created limitations on available air travel and “shelter in place” restrictions, particularly in many remote Alaskan communities. Under the emergency rule signed on March 24, 2020, NMFS temporarily waived the requirement for vessels in the Partial Coverage Category to carry a fishery observer from March 27 through April 19, 2020. On April 18, 2020, NMFS announced a limited extension of the temporary

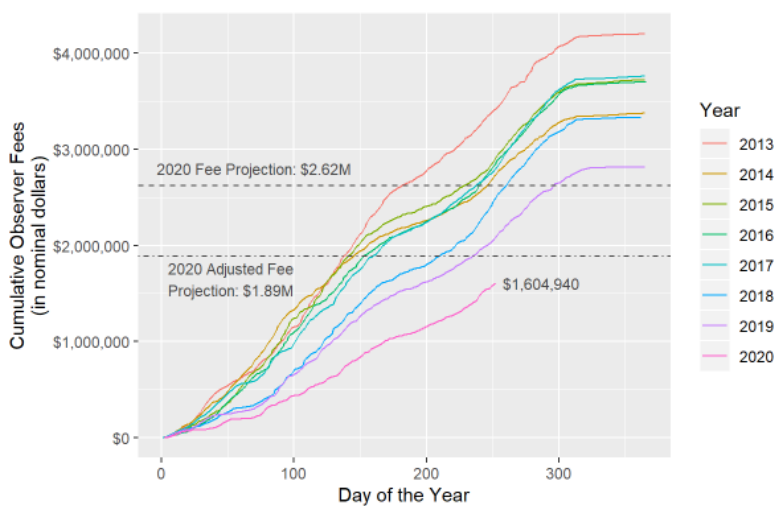
¹ Prepared by NMFS Alaska Regional Office and NMFS Alaska Fisheries Science Center

waiver of observer requirements, which narrowed the scope and reinitiated deployment of observers on trips departing from the port of Kodiak, AK (the majority of GOA trawl fisheries occurred out of Kodiak during this timeframe). On June 28, 2020, NMFS expanded observer deployment in the partial coverage category to include 13 additional ports and further reduce the scope of waivers issued.

The largest component of the Alaskan groundfish fisheries, vessels and processors in the full coverage category (including catcher processors and participants in limited access privilege programs), were not issued waivers in 2020. Additionally, requirements for deployment of electronic monitoring (EM) was not waived for trawl catcher vessels fishing under the trawl EM exempted fishing permit and only a few trips were released from coverage under the fixed gear EM portion of the partial coverage category for circumstances when an EM service technician was unable to travel. The fisheries off Alaska are still underway; the impact of the waivers on deployment rates will be analyzed in the 2020 Annual Report which will be available in June 2021.

Estimated observer fees and budget

In the FMAC meeting in May, 2020, the committee discussed the uncertainty and strong potential for reduced fee revenues due to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic including lower fishing effort and reduced market prices. The FMAC recommended that the Council should consider planning for addressing a funding shortfall in the future for the partial coverage observer program. Figure 1 depicts the cumulative observer fees as they assess by day through the calendar year for 2013-2020. It is still uncertain what fee revenue will be generated during the remainder of 2020. To provide a range of potential fee revenues, NMFS projected two potential values for fees: the first using effort projections from previous years without any impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in estimated fee projections of \$2.62M for 2020. The second, a conservative estimate of fees with very reduced fishing effort is estimated at \$1.89M. NMFS estimates that the actual observer fee revenue will be somewhere between these two projections. The 2020 fee projections will be updated for the final ADP in December.



Note: Observer fees from 'Other Groundfish' are not included.

Figure 1. Cumulative observer fees, assessed by day, from 2013-2020. Data included for 2020 through Sept 8.

NMFS set a preliminary budget for the draft 2021 ADP of \$4.46M that will result in at least 2,000 observer days and maintain the existing size of the Fixed Gear EM pool (169 vessels). This budget is set at a level that, if maintained, would result in a financially solvent partial coverage program for the next four years, which would cover all option years on the existing federal contract. This budget is a combination of fees that were collected from the 2019 fishing year, carryover of fees from previous years, conservative fee revenue projections for 2020 and federal funds contributed from AFSC. The final budget will be updated in the final 2021 ADP in December.

NMFS Recommendations for 2021 Deployment Methods

EM trip-selection pool

Vessels in the partial coverage category using fixed gear may request to be in the 2021 EM selection pool using ODDS.² Any vessel in the EM selection pool in 2020 will remain eligible to be in the EM selection pool unless a request is submitted to not be in the EM selection pool for 2021 or NMFS has disapproved the vessel's 2020 VMP. All requests, to be in or out of the EM selection pool for 2021 must be received by November 1, 2020. Any vessel that does not request to participate by this deadline will not be eligible for placement in the 2021 EM selection pool and will be in the partial coverage trip selection pool for observer coverage.

New this year, NMFS is adding a step to the Vessel Monitoring Plan (VMP) approval process to increase compliance and address data quality issues. As part of the VMP approval, NMFS will assess a vessel's adherence to their approved VMP. For example, does a vessel operator have recurring issues (such as obstructing the camera view or consistently not addressing camera cleanliness) that have resulted in un-usable or very poor quality EM data? The quantity and severity of compliance issues that impact the quality and use of that data will be used to assess the standing of a vessel and their eligibility to participate in the fixed gear EM program. NMFS will notify the vessel operator of their status through a cover letter attached to the VMP approval on an annual basis. A vessel with poor standing will be placed into probation status and the vessel owner/operator will be notified of specific issues they need to address in order to bring the vessel into compliance. Failure of a vessel operator to address these issues or comply with other conditions of the VMP may result in the vessel not being eligible to participate in the EM pool in the following year.

Based on the estimated budget for the draft ADP, the EM selection pool will be composed of up to 169 fixed gear vessels, which would maintain the size of the EM pool from 2020. If funding is insufficient to accommodate all the vessels that request to participate in the EM selection pool, NMFS will prioritize placement in the EM selection pool as follows:

- vessels that are already equipped with EM systems;
- vessels that are cost effective for EM and unlikely to introduce large data gaps; and
- vessels 40-57.5 ft LOA where carrying an observer is problematic due to bunk space or life raft limitations.

² The request to be part of the EM selection pool can also be made online at <http://odds.afsc.noaa.gov> or by calling the ODDS call center at 1-855-747-6377.

Trawl EM Trip-Selection Pool

NMFS has issued an Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) to evaluate the efficacy of EM on pollock catcher vessels using pelagic trawl gear in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska³. NMFS approved the EFP in January, 2020 allowing pollock catcher vessels using pelagic trawl gear to use EM systems in lieu of at sea observers. The goals for EM is compliance monitoring of maximized retention. Catch accounting for the vessel's catch and bycatch is done via eLandings reports and shoreside plant observers. The specific requirements for vessels in the trawl EM trip-selection pool was determined through the permit approval process.

Industry received National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) funding to support the project with 42 catcher vessels, 8 tender vessels, and 9 shoreside processors participating in the first year of the EFP. Additional funding is being sought for 2021 to expand EFP participation by 27 vessels.

Observer trip-selection pool

Strata: NMFS recommends 3 sampling strata for the deployment of observers in 2021:

- Hook-and-line vessels greater than or equal to 40 ft LOA,
- Pot vessels greater than or equal to 40 ft LOA, and
- Trawl vessels

Port-based Trip Selection: Trip selection will be the method of assigning observers to at-sea fishing events for vessels in the partial observer coverage category in 2021. Vessels will log their trips into ODDS and will be notified by the system if the trip is selected for coverage. Consistent with revisions to the 2020 deployment plan due to COVID-19, during 2021, observers will be deployed from select ports throughout Alaska to meet monitoring objectives for vessels in the Partial Coverage Category of the North Pacific groundfish and Pacific Halibut fisheries. These ports were identified both because travel and lodging conditions could allow observers to meet and maintain applicable health mandates for deployment into the commercial fisheries and because there are expected to be enough fishing trips originating and ending in these ports to make it cost effective to place observers in these communities. Currently, these ports include: (1) Akutan, (2) Dutch Harbor/Unalaska, (3) False Pass, (4) Homer, (5) Juneau, (6) Ketchikan, (7) King Cove, (8) Kodiak, (9) Nome, (10) Petersburg, (11) Sand Point, (12) Seward, (13) Sitka, and (14) Yakutat.

Consistent with existing regulatory authority at 50 CFR 679.51(a)(1), NMFS may release trips from observer coverage on a case-by-case basis for vessels in the Partial Coverage Category. NMFS has, and will continue to, use this authority when no observers meeting health mandates are available for deployment. NMFS may modify the list of ports with available observers in the future in response to transportation availability and/or changes in health mandates.

Allocation strategy: NMFS recommends an observer deployment allocation strategy of 15% plus optimization based on discarded groundfish and halibut PSC, and Chinook PSC. This allocation strategy provides a balance between minimizing the variability of discard estimates, prioritization of PSC-limited fisheries, and the need to reduce gaps in observer coverage in the partial coverage category.

³ More details on the EFP permit are available at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/resources-fishing/exempted-fishing-permits-alaska>

Deployment rates: NMFS uses estimates of anticipated fishing effort and available sea-day budgets to determine selection rates for observer deployment in each stratum. As a preliminary budget for the draft ADP, NMFS estimated total expenditures in 2021 of \$4.46M resulting in estimated coverage rates: Hook-and-line – 15%; Pot – 15%; Trawl – 18.5%; Fixed Gear EM – 30%; and Trawl EM EFP – 100%. *These coverage rates are preliminary estimates and will differ from rates determined in the final ADP.* Once the final budget is known, an updated estimate of anticipated fishing effort and simulation models (following methods outlined in NMFS 2015) will be used to estimate expected coverage rates in the final 2021 ADP.

No-selection pool

As in previous deployment plans, NMFS recommends the no-selection pool continue to be composed of: 1) fixed-gear vessels less than 40 ft LOA and vessels fishing with jig gear, which includes handline, jig, troll, and dinglebar troll gear; 2) vessels voluntarily participating in EM innovation and research.

Waivers

NMFS continues to respond to the changing landscape caused by COVID-19. Deployment plans for observers strive to keep all operators, communities, and observers safe. The 2021 Draft ADP is consistent with the Council's recommendation for “port fidelity,” with observers adhering to State of Alaska health mandates applicable to commercial fisheries. NMFS maintains the ability to release vessels on a case by case basis in all ports (including our listed ports) when conditions warrant. In other words, our deployment plan is flexible to respond to changing conditions and we can release selected trips if observers cannot meet specific protective plans.

Vessel operators in the partial coverage sector will continue to log all trips in ODDS, regardless of the port of departure or landing. AIS will work with NMFS to release trips from ports in which we are not currently deploying observers. For selected trips from observed ports, AIS will continue to work with each vessel operator to communicate their COVID-19 protocols. AIS will work with NMFS to release trips when they are unable to provide an observer who is compliant with all applicable protective plans.

Chinook Salmon

To the extent possible, observers will continue to collect genetic samples from salmon caught as bycatch in groundfish fisheries to support efforts to identify stock of origin. COVID-19 protocols at most shoreside processing plants now prevent vessel observers from entering the processor to complete any further sampling. NMFS has altered our data collection procedures to account for this and, when possible, will increase shore-based observer coverage to help fill in data gaps. In many cases, COVID-19 restrictions mean that shore-based observers will complete sampling for pollock trawl vessels regardless if they are observed at-sea or if they are participating in the trawl EM EFP.

For trips that are outside of the trawl EFP and delivered to tender vessels and the trips outside of the pollock fishery, salmon counts and tissue samples will be obtained from all salmon found within observer at-sea samples of the total catch.

Annual Coverage Category Requests

Partial coverage catcher/processors: Under Observer Program regulations at 50 CFR 679.51(a)(3), the owner of a non-trawl catcher/processor can request to be in the partial observer coverage category, on an annual basis, if the vessel processed less than 79,000 lb (35.8 mt) of groundfish on an average weekly basis in a particular prior year. The deadline to request placement in the partial observer coverage category for the following fishing year is July 1 and the request is accomplished by submitting a form⁴ to NMFS. Eight catcher/processors requested, and NMFS approved, placement in the partial coverage category for the 2021 fishing year.

Full coverage catcher vessels: Under Observer Program regulations at 50 CFR 679.51(a)(4), the owner of a trawl catcher vessel may annually request the catcher vessel to be placed in the full observer coverage category for all directed fishing for groundfish using trawl gear in the BSAI management area for the upcoming year. Requests to be placed in the full observer coverage in lieu of partial observer coverage category must be made in ODDS⁵ prior to October 15, 2020 for the 2021 fishing year. NMFS will publish the list of catcher vessels that have been approved to be in the full coverage category on the [NMFS website](#).

Observer Declare and Deploy System (ODDS)

For 2021, the user experience in ODDS will not change for a vessel operator. NMFS will retain the current business operating procedure of allowing vessels to log up to three trips in advance and programming that prevents a 40 – 57.5' fixed gear vessel from being randomly selected for a third consecutive observer trip. Any observed trip that is canceled would automatically be inherited on the next logged trip. Vessels are allowed to cancel or change any unobserved trips (logged trips that have not been selected to carry observer coverage) themselves, but any observed trips (logged trips that have been selected for observer coverage) that must be rescheduled need to be coordinated by contacting the ODDS call center (1-855-747-6377). As NMFS has described in the previous Annual Reports, there are improvements to the programming in ODDS that would allow vessels to change the dates for future observed trips, rather than having the current cancel and inherit process. This modification is a priority for NMFS and the Council, however due to limitations in staff resources, the programming changes to ODDS have not yet been evaluated.

⁴ The form for small catcher/processors to request to be in partial coverage is available at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/webdam/download/85047638>

⁵ Instructions for catcher vessels to request to be in full coverage using ODDS are available at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/document/bsai-trawl-catcher-vessel-annual-full-observer-coverage-request>