

Observer Provider Issues and Ideas

Alaskan Observers, Inc.

September 2021

Full Coverage Alaska

1. **The extensions for deployments** beyond 90 days and up to 120 days has been extremely helpful with allowing continued coverage while the Providers continue to have a shortage of leads. Many of our observers prefer the option of working up to 120 days as apposed to getting contracts cut short due to the 90-day limit. The ability for FMA to extend up to 120 days is not just an option under the Pandemic Emergency but is allowed in regulation. FMA can cap the extensions at any number.

2. **Allowing persons with less than the required experience to serve as leads** – We have made limited use of this option but have found that the few times we have been given waivers to allow this to be extremely helpful.

2. **New Hires** - We have been able to hire new people to provide the numbers of Observers that we need but continue to struggle to get them to lead qualified status. With the inshore pollock B-season ending will mean that more than half the positions on the remaining fleet will require an observer with lead status. Yet, less than half of the Observers that are available to work qualify as leads.

3. **Limited Access Privilege Programs** -Each time a sector of the fishery has changed from open access to limit access privilege programs NMFS uses the model of requiring at least one lead on each boat. Currently all C/P trawl vessel in full coverage and all the Longline Coop boats require at least one lead observer during fishing operations. While the demand for more lead observers in the full coverage program has increased the platforms to get Observers the requisite experience to become leads have significantly declined. **Examples of lost training platforms includes:**

-**Longliners** in open access could have any observer provide their coverage. Initially, after the formation of the Longline Coop some vessels opted to take a lead observer and a non-lead. The latter allowed us to continue to get some Observers sampling experience on those boats. That has shifted and no vessels are taking 2 observers anymore, and all vessels now always carry a single lead observer.

-**Partial Coverage** -prior to implementation of the partial-coverage program, full-coverage providers could place any observer on the catcher vessels to get those people sampling experience, that is no longer an option for Providers that don't hold the Partial Coverage Contract

-**Hake Coverage** – sometime in the past decade the Alaska Program stopped giving observers credit for sampling experience gained during hake observing on C/Ps. The vessels and their processing activities are the same for hake as they are for Pollock. There are some sampling protocol differences between the programs, but the experience is relevant to both programs.

- **Electronic Monitoring Catcher Vessels** – prior to the EM EFP full coverage providers had several dozen boats that we could place any observer on to get sampling experience. Loss of those training platforms have over the past two years significantly reduced our ability to get new Observers to the point of lead status.

-**Electronic Monitoring Processing Plants** – currently we can use any observer to cover the plants that are taking fish from EM EFP vessels. However, recently at a meeting with FMA Jennifer Ferdinand informed us that they consider those positions to be ones that will require additional training and not everyone will qualify for training. That thought is creating a great deal of concern for the Full Coverage Providers. The loss of one more platform to get people to lead status will be crippling.

Ideas for the Long-term to prevent continuing and future lead Observer Shortages:

1. Continue to allow Observers to have the option to work up to 120 days

2. Debriefing – there continues to be a problem with getting Observers debriefed in a timely manner between deployments. Some Observers have experienced delays up to a month before any FMA debriefer gets to them. This significantly impacts our ability to redeploy people. We think there should be some changes implemented to streamline the process.

3. Requirements to obtain lead observer certification –

-Currently an observer needs 2 deployments with successful debriefings, 60 sampling days, and 100 sampled hauls on a trawl C/P to get certified to be a lead on either trawl or longline C/Ps

-Observers that have 2 deployments, 60 sampling days, and 30 sampled sets on any type of fixed gear vessel can be a lead on a longline C/P (Note: only the provider that has the Partial Coverage Contract has any significant ability to get people to lead status with this option)

Changes needed to qualification for lead certification

- a. Reduce the number of qualifying sampling days needed to 30 and sampled hauls to 50.
- b. Count hauls sampled on catcher vessels towards the required number of hauls sampled
- c. Count sampling days and hauls sampled in Hake towards lead certification in Alaska
- d. Allow FMA to have some discretion to let an observer that has performed well on deployments to serve as a lead based on performance not on set numbers of deployments, sampling days, and sampled hauls