

C1 NMFS Observer Annual Report

The SSC received a presentation from Sara Cleaver (NPFMC), Jennifer Ferdinand (NOAA-AKRO) and Geoff Mayhew (NOAA-AKRO) on the Observer Program 2023 Annual Report with an overview of substantial changes to the Annual Deployment Plan (ADP) and NMFS recommendations for the 2025 ADP. These changes were introduced and presented to the Council in October and December 2023 for the 2024 ADP; however, the SSC did not review the draft ADP at that time due to time constraints. This June agenda item is unusual in that the SSC is tasked with reviewing NMFS recommendations for the 2025 ADP without a full review of the 2024 ADP or a full year of data to assess its performance. With that in mind, **the NMFS recommendations seemed reasonable overall and reflect a continuation of improvements to a program that balances many objectives.** The SSC discussion focused on the NMFS recommendations contained in Chapter 6 of the Annual Report.

NMFS recommends continuing the proximity allocation method for the partial coverage strata, excluding trawl electronic monitoring (EM) sector, in 2025. This is a new method introduced in the 2024 ADP. Since a full year of data has not yet been collected, the effectiveness of the method cannot be evaluated at this time. **The SSC supports its continuation in 2025 to ensure consistency in deployment and allow for a more comprehensive review of its performance in future annual reports. The SSC continues to support the objective of lowering the variances of estimated catches and minimizing data gaps.** Based on retrospective analyses of fishery data, the method performed well statistically, as shown in the draft ADP. The SSC would be interested in a map or other information on how this sampling method works compared to previous methods or to the cost-weighted box analyzed in the draft ADP. An example or figure that shows how each method allocates observer effort in some snapshot in space and time would be helpful.

NMFS recommends continuing with the current sampling strategy in the trawl EM sector for PSC monitoring and biological samples. **In addition to understanding the costs of the program the SSC would like to see an analysis of whether the increase in EM changes the spatial coverage or species composition of the biological samples available for stock assessments and genetic stock composition, and whether these samples adequately represent catches.**

To address previous delays and inefficiencies in data processing, NMFS recommends that the Observer Program work closely with the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission to find an optimal video review selection rate and strategy to enhance the utility of EM data. The SSC has voiced concerns about the time required for video review, as some of these data are critical for in-season management and accurate stock assessments. **The SSC supports the NMFS recommendation to assess how delayed or missing, fixed-gear EM data impact the risk of exceeding OFLs, TACs, PSC limits or other thresholds.**

NMFS expects to implement the regulated trawl EM program in 2025, requiring vessels to opt-in and adhere to specific monitoring plans and hardware requirements. The recommendations lay out clear steps for integrating EM into trawl fisheries. **The SSC reiterates the need to ensure that stock assessments are able to track the continued increase in EM and that necessary data continue to be collected, including age and length composition samples.**

Beyond the NMFS recommendations, the SSC had other general comments as follows:

- Given continued evidence of an observer effect (characteristics of observed trips differ from unobserved trips indicating differences in vessel fishing behavior when an observer is aboard, e.g., differences in duration and species landed), **the SSC encourages continued statistical analysis to better understand the differences and the degree of resulting bias in estimates.**

- **The SSC requests that the Observer Program annual report include tracking statistics on the collection of length and aging structures for stock assessment.**
- **The SSC requests that efforts continue to try to resolve the current disconnect between the ODDS system and the eLandings system.**
- **The SSC reiterates its recommendation from June 2023 that the analysts work towards providing cost per day calculations for EM coverage similar to those provided for observer coverage, as a basis for evaluating operational tradeoffs between cost and data quantity and quality.**
- **The SSC recommends that an occasional CIE (Center for Independent Experts) review be convened to review the ADP, with emphasis on novel methods such as the proximity allocation method and other elements of the Observer Program as appropriate.**
- **The SSC would appreciate the opportunity for future review of the draft ADP, when substantial changes to the methods are proposed.**