

Joint NPFMC / IPHC Meeting

June 7, 2017, Juneau, AK

Agenda Item 4: Progress reports On Council Research and Management Priorities

4a. GOA Observer Program Update and Discussion

The Observer Program provides the regulatory framework for NMFS-certified observers to obtain information necessary to conserve and manage the groundfish and halibut fisheries in the GOA and the BSAI management areas. Observers collect biological samples and fishery-dependent information used to estimate total catch and interactions with protected species. Data collected by well-trained, independent observers are a cornerstone of management of the Federal fisheries off Alaska.

The current Observer Program structure was first implemented in 2013, when the program was modified to address sampling issues associated with non-random observer deployment on some vessels and fisheries, and cost inequality among fishery participants. To improve estimates of catch and bycatch, the restructured Observer Program also expanded observer coverage to vessels that were previously unobserved (including those targeting halibut), and increased the number of vessels required to always have observer coverage. A major accomplishment of the restructured Observer Program is the implementation of a rigorous scientific method for deploying observers, which complies with the Magnuson-Stevens Act requirement that the program gather reliable data by stationing observers on all or a statistically-reliable sample of fishing vessels and processors. The previous Observer Program did not distribute observer coverage using well-established random sampling methods, because fishermen could choose when to take an observer to fulfill their observer coverage requirement. This ad-hoc deployment method prevented representative sampling across all fishing trips, resulting in sampling effort that did not correspond with fishing effort and resulted in consistent problems with under- or over-coverage in some fisheries and vessel categories. The scientific sampling plans implemented since 2013 result in better spatial and temporal distribution of observer coverage across all fisheries. This greatly improves the quality of data collected in Federal fisheries off Alaska and NMFS' ability to estimate catch and bycatch. Random deployment also enables NMFS to evaluate the statistical properties of estimators and improves the agency's ability to evaluate and improve catch estimation procedures.

Under the current Observer Program, all vessels and processors that participate in federally managed or parallel groundfish and halibut fisheries off Alaska are assigned to one of two categories, based on data needs associated with specific management programs: 1) the full observer coverage category, where vessels and processors have at least one observer present for all fishing activity, or 2) the partial observer coverage category, where NMFS determines when and where observer coverage is needed, described annually in the Annual Deployment Plan (ADP) developed by NMFS in consultation with the Council. Overall in 2016, observers collected data on board 500 fixed gear and trawl vessels and at 7 processing facilities, for a total of 43,706 observer days in the BSAI and GOA (39,029 full coverage days on vessels and in plants; and 4,677 partial coverage days). In the GOA, all catcher vessels and shoreside processors are in partial coverage unless they are participating in the Central GOA Rockfish Program. Almost all catcher/processors operating in the GOA are in full coverage, although there are a few small catcher/processors that meet the limited criteria to be in partial coverage.

Each year, the ADP defines and sets coverage rates for the partial coverage strata. The owner or operator of a vessel in the trip selection pool must register each fishing trip in the Observer Declare and Deploy System (ODDS), which is programmed to randomly select trips for observer coverage based on the assigned annual selection rate for each stratum. Vessels in the no selection pool are not selected for observer coverage. In the partial coverage category in 2016, the selection rates were determined by the

gear type used on each fishing trip; in 2017, the selection rates are determined by gear and whether the vessel delivers its harvest to a tender vessel (Table 1).

Table 1 Partial coverage sampling strata in 2016 and 2017, and selection rates

Trip selection pool	2016		2017	
	Trawl	28%	Trawl	Shoreside – 18% Tender – 14%
Hook-and-line	15%	Hook-and-line	Shoreside – 11% Tender – 25%	
Pot	15%	Pot	Shoreside – 4% Tender – 4%	
EM selection pool (pre-implementation; fixed gear only)	Vessel selection by calendar period: • if pre-registered for selection period – 30% • if did not pre-register – 100%		Trip selection – 30%	
Zero selection pool (EM research, jig, vessels <40ft)	0%		0%	

The selection rate for partial coverage is driven by available funding. To fund partial coverage, NMFS assesses a fee equal to 1.25% of the ex-vessel value of the landings of groundfish and halibut subject to the fee. The Council determined that the same fee percentage should apply to all sectors in the partial coverage category, as they all benefit from resulting observer data that is essential for conservation and management of the fisheries in which they participate. Therefore, all vessels in partial coverage contribute to the observer fee, regardless of the observer selection rate to which they are subject.

In addition to the fee, NMFS contributed Federal funds to supplement observer coverage in 2014 and 2015, which also allowed some carryover of fees into 2016 (Table 2). In 2016, the agency informed the Council that as a national goal, NMFS wants the cost of observer deployment at-sea to be borne entirely by industry. As a result, there has been a considerable decline in funding for observer days in 2016 and 2017, resulting in the lower selection rates described in Table 1.

Table 2 Budget and observer days from 2013 to 2017

Year	Budget \$ million (fees + Federal funds)	Observer days
2013	\$3.9 (Federal funds)*	3,533 (used)
2014	\$4.9 (\$3.0 + \$1.9)	4,573 (used)
2015	\$5.7 (\$3.0 + \$2.7)	5,318 (used)
2016	\$5.5 (\$5.1 + \$390K)	4,677 (used)
2017	\$3.7 (fees)	3,121 (projected)

*Only \$2.1m was spent in 2013, the remainder was carried over to future years.

The Council is concerned about the lower coverage rates in 2017, and the likelihood that these lower rates will continue for the next few years. To address this concern, the Council has asked NMFS and the Observer Advisory Committee to begin to consider approaches to address low coverage rates, including looking for efficiencies within the existing sampling design, and evaluating the present fee structure. Under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the Council has the authority to raise the observer fee up to a maximum of 2%; other ideas have also been suggested, such as designing a hybrid program that combines the system of fees with pay-as-you-go funds. Beginning in 2019, the observer fee will also be used to support the electronic monitoring program, which during pre-implementation has been funded through NMFS and the National Fish and Wildlife Fund.

NMFS publishes an Annual Report with descriptive information for the whole Observer Program, and a scientific evaluation of the deployment of observers in the partial observer coverage category. The Annual Report for 2016 was recently published, and will be presented to the Council at the June Council meeting.