



North Pacific Fishery Management Council

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Partial Coverage Fishery Monitoring Advisory Committee REPORT

April 19, 2021: 8:30am-1:30pm, AKDT

Committee: Nicole Kimball (Chair), Julie Bonney, Dan Falvey, Luke Szymanski, Abigail Turner Franke, Kathy Hansen, Caitlin Yaeger, Bob Alverson

Members Absent: Tom Evich and Julie Kavanaugh

Agency Staff: Kate Haapala (NPFMC), Diana Evans (NPFMC), Sarah Labelle (NPFMC), Shannon Gleason (NPFMC), Jennifer Mondragon (NMFS), Maggie Chan (NMFS), Josh Keaton (NMFS), Jennifer Ferdinand (NMFS), Lisa Thompson (NMFS), Alex Perry (OLE), Tom Meyer (OLE)

Other Attendees: Ruth Christensen (UCB) and Mike Orcutt (Archipelago)

1. Introduction

The chair of the Partial Coverage Fishery Monitoring Advisory Committee (PCFMAC) opened the meeting and Kate Haapala provided an overview of the agenda. The chair explained the purpose of this meeting was for the committee to discuss ongoing or pending electronic monitoring (EM) proposals with NMFS and make recommendations for continued work on cost efficiencies in the partial coverage observer program. The PCFMAC typically has a meeting in the fall to review the upcoming year's Draft Annual Deployment Plan (ADP). However, this meeting allowed the committee to receive an update on the work to support partial coverage cost efficiencies, understand what may be incorporated in the 2022 ADP, and to make recommendations before the May 2021 meeting of the Fishery Monitoring Advisory Committee (FMAC). The annual May FMAC meeting is the primary opportunity for early recommendations to be included in the coming year's Draft ADP and the review of the previous year's Annual Report.

2. Discuss Current or Pending National Fish and Wildlife (NFWF) Proposals

The committee discussed current and potential EM project proposals and received project updates from two current NFWF EM project applicants. The purpose of this discussion was to facilitate coordination between industry and NMFS on existing projects and discuss the feasibility of NMFS engagement on new projects for which industry is applying for grant funding.

Current NFWF-funded projects:

1. Portable EM Systems: The Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association (ALFA) and the North Pacific Fishermen's Association (NPFA) are currently working on a NFWF-funded project that has two components: testing portable EM systems for deployment in remote ports; and using machine learning to improve data quality. The data quality component of the project is to develop machine learning algorithms that can evaluate image quality by looking at water droplets on the camera, provide feedback to vessel operators, and allow vessel operators to fix camera issues in real-time. The low-cost EM system portion of the project will test six new fixed gear EM systems – three systems each from two different providers. These six systems will go on six vessels that are currently in the EM pool (and carrying

standard EM hardware) to conduct a side-by-side comparison and verify that the portable systems provide data needed for catch accounting. Once the first phase of the project is complete, the second phase will involve 12 vessels that are currently in the observer pool. If one of these vessels is selected for observer coverage while they are carrying the new portable EM systems, NMFS would grant the vessel a waiver from observer coverage for that trip. The timing of the project has been delayed due to supply chain issues due to COVID-19. The Saltwater systems will begin phase 1, side-by-side testing soon. AMR systems will not likely be tested under later this fall. Therefore, the second phase of the project will continue in 2022 and the applicants will seek a no-cost extension from NFWF to continue the work into next year.

2. Trawl EM: The PCFMAC received a short update on an ongoing NFWF project from United Catcher Boats and Alaska Groundfish Data Bank to improve and expand EM systems onboard pollock mid-water trawl catcher vessels in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska. The applicants for this project will apply for their final year of NFWF funding in 2022 to support the cost of shoreside observers, EM equipment maintenance and video review with a regulated program scheduled for implementation in 2023. A similar proposal from Aleutians East Borough is expected for their project in the Western Gulf of Alaska. The Trawl EM Committee will next meet May 21, 2021 to draft alternatives for the Council's regulatory analysis for consideration at the June Council meeting.

Other projects:

The committee also discussed scaling up the size of the fixed gear EM fleet to 195 vessels (the current pool is 169 vessels). Other potential NFWF funding ideas discussed by the PCFMAC include: 1) evaluating the possibility of getting shark and/or sablefish lengths from EM data to support stock assessments, and 2) an industry co-op model for observer delivery service that would require direct contracts between industry and observer providers, combined with random trip selection in ODDS. The latter EM project is a proposal from the Fishing Vessel Owner's Association to form and test an industry run co-op model among the association's member vessels that will contract directly with existing NMFS-certified observer contractors and EM providers intended to lower costs. The conceptual model for this project has the potential to get financial support from The Nature Conservancy for a small pilot project. However, prior to any work starting, there would need to be coordination and communication with NMFS to assess feasibility, understand the requests of the agency including changes to ODDs, and a project timeline.

Overall, the committee supports both ongoing EM NFWF-supported projects, both trawl and fixed gear. In addition, the committee continued to support expanding the size of the fixed gear EM pool.

3. Update on Partial Coverage Cost Efficiency Projects and 2022 Annual Deployment Plan

The Council recommended adjusting the observer fee percent to 1.65% at the October 2019 Council meeting and this change will be implemented in 2021. Coinciding with that motion was a second motion outlining the Council's priorities for cost efficiency analysis in the partial coverage observer program. The Council has issued two additional and subsequent motions, all of which emphasize continued support for the pelagic trawl EM EFP, integrating fixed gear EM data into the baseline observer coverage levels, re-evaluating the zero selection pool, and optimizing the fixed gear EM fleet.

The PCFMAC received a presentation from Ms. Jennifer Ferdinand (FMA) and Ms. Jennifer Mondragon (NMFS) on how NMFS is currently working towards cost efficiencies for the partial coverage observer program, as well as a proposal for a new analytical pathway forward. NMFS' presentation highlighted the

imbalance in resources (e.g., monitoring fee, supplemental federal funds, and agency staff) and the programs that need to be integrated into the upcoming (2022) and future ADPs. These include the potential BSAI Pacific cod trawl catcher vessel LAPP (moves vessels to full coverage), pelagic trawl EM EFP as a regulated program in 2023 (including associated shoreside observers), fixed gear EM (as is and under a scenario of program expansion), and random at-sea deployment of observers with optimization.

Agency staff communicated that the timing and demand on staff resources to support Council analyses, support the trawl EM EFP through the regulatory process, and accommodate piecemeal changes to the program does not allow for a holistic evaluation of all changes and opportunities to achieve cost efficiencies in the partial coverage program and is not making sufficient progress. For this reason, **the agency proposed a different approach to the Council's priorities:**

- **For the Draft 2022 ADP: evaluate and compare the trip-based and port-based deployment approaches as the main analytical task.** The evaluation of the port-based deployment approach is responsive to the Council's June 2020 recommendation for reintroducing partial coverage observers during COVID-19 after a blanket waiver was discontinued and the FMAC's recommendation to evaluate port-based deployment as a potential cost efficiency. The 2022 ADP would be reviewed by the Council in October and a final in December, as normal.
- **NMFS would carry the design selected in 2022 forward into 2023, effectively creating a two-year deployment plan.**
- **Use the time and resources saved through a two-year deployment plan to complete a holistic analysis of cost efficiencies during 2023, for implementation in the 2024 ADP.** Evaluations include baseline coverage needs for weights (to inform EM); re-evaluate zero-coverage pool; sampling plans for observers (port-based, trip-based, shoreside with maximized retention); re-evaluate strata.

Committee members agreed with the need to take a holistic look at the partial coverage program to understand what an integrated and optimized program would look like, and that this analysis should happen before the next Federal contracting period. The current Federal contract is set to expire in 2024. However, committee members also expressed concern about the pause in changes to the 2023 ADP. Some committee members still want to pursue incremental progress to be made in the 2022 ADP before “freezing” the deployment plan for 2 years such as an adjustment to the zero selection pool and a limited expansion of fixed gear EM, in addition to the planned comparison between a trip-based and port-based deployment approach and the continued support of the trawl EM EFP as presented by NMFS.

The PCFMAC came to consensus on several recommendations listed below (in no particular order of priority):

1. **The committee recommends NMFS evaluate and compare the trip-based and port-based deployment approaches for cost efficiencies in the Draft 2022 ADP.** This analysis is consistent with the PCFMAC's recommendation from its September 2020 meeting where the committee recommended NMFS use this opportunity of the port-based approach to gather information on costs to enable evaluation of port-based deployment in the (non-COVID-19) future. In particular, the committee had discussed looking at potential cost impacts of limiting observer travel and reducing observer down days.
2. **The committee recommends a brief workplan that outlines major milestones for the holistic partial coverage analysis be completed in advance of the May 2021 FMAC meeting.** The proposed approach was new to the committee, and members needed additional information before

making recommendations on a two-year deployment plan. The committee recommends the workplan take into consideration potential linkages between and timing of the trawl EM regulatory package and potential fixed gear EM program changes. The Draft 2022 ADP could also be streamlined by removing certain analytical sections covered by the holistic review of the partial coverage program, such as EM optimization, stock assessment metrics, and portions of the gap analysis that focus on average weight needs for the Catch Accounting System. The committee felt these items should be discussed further at the May 2021 FMAC meeting.

3. **Committee members requested NMFS be prepared to discuss at the May FMAC meeting whether any changes to the zero selection pool could be implemented in the 2022 ADP prior to the implementation of a two-year deployment plan, if that approach is recommended.** ALFA and NPFA members of the PCFMAC shared a discussion paper outlining possible adjustment to the zero selection pool which could be discussed at the FMAC meeting. PCFMAC members noted this analysis could also inform EM optimization.
4. **Committee members requested NMFS evaluate the feasibility of expanding the fixed gear EM pools in fixed gear EM pool in 2022 and/or 2023.** In 2019 the Council increased the limit of vessels in the fixed gear EM pool to 195 in the 2020 ADP. There are currently 169 fixed gear vessels operational in the EM pool. Some PCFMAC members reported there is continued interest from a limited number of vessels in joining the EM pool each year. The committee discussed a variety of funding mechanisms to accommodate new vessels in 2022 including EM hardware sharing, the FY22 increase in appropriations to the North Pacific Observer fund, and if the new portable EM systems prove sufficient, using the EM hardware provided by NFWF for this project to accommodate new vessels in 2023.
4. **The committee recommends monitoring committee reports be made available with more notice prior to Council meetings for public comment.** The committee recognized this ability depends on the timing of the committee relative to the Council meeting.

5. Update on Partial Coverage Fee Revenues and Future Partial Coverage Funding

The PCFMAC received a brief update from NMFS on partial coverage fee revenues and future partial coverage funding. NMFS has collected approximately \$2.46M in fee revenue from landings that occurred in 2020 (note, there are currently five delinquent payers). In addition, in FY20, FMA received \$785,326 of the requested \$1 million in Federal funding to support sea days in the partial coverage fleet in fiscal year 2021. FMA received an additional \$434,000 in FY21 in federal funding to support partial coverage observer and EM sea days. Information on how many observer days will carry over from 2021 to the 2022 observer contract will be provided in the upcoming Observer Annual Report and presented to the FMAC and Council in May and June 2021 respectively.

6. VMP Compliance Letters

The PCFMAC received a presentation from Mr. Alex Perry (OLE) regarding Vessel Monitoring Plan (VMP) compliance in the fixed gear EM program. As was noted in the 2021 ADP, as part of the VMP approval, NMFS is assessing a vessel's adherence to their approved VMP and continued non-compliance could result in disapproval in 2022. Nine notice letters have been distributed in 2021 to fixed gear EM participants that have been deemed to have repeated VMP compliance issues in 2019 and 2020, providing them the opportunity to fix issues in 2021. OLE and agency staff noted these letters provided an

opportunity for back-and-forth communication and have resulted in problem solving between owner/operators and NOAA Fisheries.

When looking at the VMP compliance data, OLE also noted some fleetwide trends of concern, including low proportion of self-reported issues and issues under vessel control more than doubled from 2018 to 2020 (from >30% to >60%). OLE intends to send out a letter to all vessels in the fixed gear EM fleet to remind industry of the applicable regulations, and to foster a dialogue between NOAA Fisheries and vessel operators/owners to troubleshoot issues. OLE offered to let PCFMAC members review that letter for readability or other concerns prior to release. The PCFMAC appreciated the opportunity to receive an update and to provide feedback to OLE on the fleetwide letter before it is released to the public.