

Status of analytical projects related to the Observer Program

Priority	Name	Description	Status / Due Date / Target Date
Program-level Projects			
1	COVID-19 response	NMFS staff are devoting a substantial amount of effort to re-engineered observer logistics processes in response to COVID-19. This includes redesigning training, briefing, and debriefing; changing sampling protocols; issuing waivers for partial coverage vessels; and potentially modifying trip selection.	As of September 2020, NMFS has transitioned to a port-based trip selection method of deployment for observers in partial coverage.
2	Annual Report/ Annual Deployment Plan	Every year, an Annual Report of the preceding fishing year and an Annual Deployment Plan (ADP) for the upcoming fishing year are prepared.	The 2019 Annual Report will be released, but will not be presented to the FMAC or Council due to agenda changes caused by COVID-19 response.
3	Analysis of catch and bycatch estimation methods	Ongoing analysis of catch and bycatch estimation methods, including evaluating design-based and ratio estimators; incorporating variance from at-sea sampling through to the trip level; and then assessing post-strata definitions.	Information on variance is included in Appendix C of the 2019 Annual Report.
4	Report on onboard observer sampling	Report on observer sampling results, e.g., proportion of total hauls that are sampled, by vessel size and gear. This item was requested by the Council in June 2016 during review of the Annual Report.	This report was presented to the FMAC in May 2017, and an AFSC tech memo is in peer review and is expected to be published in 2020.
5	Average weight of halibut wastage	Impact analysis of differences in average weights on the final wastage (discard) estimates of halibut in the IFQ fishery. Currently, CAS estimates halibut discard based on mean weight from the unsorted (retained and discarded) catch. Since halibut <32" are required to be discarded, CAS may be overestimating discarded halibut.	In 2016 NMFS modified data collection methods for halibut viability so that it is part of randomized biological sampling. Staff presented preliminary results at the American Fisheries Society meeting in October, 2019. Information on this change is also included in Chapter 4 of the 2019 Annual Report.

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Program-level Projects (Continued)			
6	Trawl CV EM Development	Engage with the Trawl Electronic Monitoring Committee (EMC) to develop EM for compliance monitoring on pelagic trawl catcher vessels. Research projects include EM for compliance monitoring of full retention in pollock fisheries including tender vessels in the Western Gulf as well as EM to support alternate methods of dockside salmon accounting.	The Council reviewed the trawl EM EFP application in October 2019, and the EFP was approved by NMFS. Since vessels began fishing under the EFP in January 2020, NMFS has held regular meetings with participants to address emergent issues. This project was identified by the PCFMAC cost efficiencies subgroup as the first priority among potential analyses for identifying cost efficiencies in the partial coverage program.
7	Improve integration of fixed gear EM data with observer data	In April 2019, the Council tasked the partial coverage cost efficiencies subgroup to continue to develop ideas related to how to best integrate the different monitoring tools, such as dockside monitoring, EM, and monitoring cooperatives.	The FMAC partial coverage subgroup report describes a long term vision for integrating monitoring tools in the partial coverage category to increase cost efficiencies. This project was identified by the PCFMAC cost efficiencies subgroup as the second priority among potential analyses for identifying cost efficiencies in the partial coverage program. Initial analyses related to optimizing the fixed gear EM fleet will be presented to the PCFMAC as part of the Draft 2021 ADP.
8	Reevaluate the zero selection stratum	In April 2019, the Council tasked the partial coverage cost efficiencies subgroup to continue to develop ideas related to how to best integrate the different monitoring tools, such as dockside monitoring, EM, and monitoring cooperatives.	The FMAC partial coverage subgroup report describes a long term vision for integrating monitoring tools in the partial coverage category to increase cost efficiencies. This project was identified by the PCFMAC cost efficiencies subgroup as the third priority among potential analyses for identifying cost efficiencies in the partial coverage program.
9	Explore alternative approaches to evaluate observer effects	In June 2018, NMFS recommended and the Council supported reassessing the performance standards used to evaluate observer effects in the Annual Report and explore alternative approaches.	NMFS staff have begun preliminary work on this analysis.
10	Agency ODDS Subgroup	In June 2018, NMFS recommended and the Council supported the formation of an Agency Subgroup to document how ODDS operates and identify alternatives for improvement. Changes could include improvements to the linkage between ODDS and eLandings, changes to allow vessels that also fish trawl gear to be placed in the EM selection pool, and the trip cancellation and inherit process.	FMA staff have begun documenting existing ODDS logic so that potential changes can be discussed with the FMAC.

11	Biological Data Assessment	The AFSC is conducting an assessment of the current way biological information collected by observers is used in stock assessments. The result of this project is to provide the scale and scope of data needs in the current program.	Information has been collected from stock assessment authors. Initial analyses related to reducing biological data gaps will be presented to the PCFMAC as part of the Draft 2021 ADP.
12	Identify best practices for estimating species weight when it is unavailable for a monitored haul	Catch estimates for EM and observer data rely on weight measurements from observed hauls. This project would identify the best methods for assigning weights when they are unavailable. Improving weight assignments could occur independently from EM integration, and is therefore left as a separate task.	Staff have not yet been assigned to this project.
13	Effects of changes to the observer program	Evaluate the effects of changes to data collection protocols that occur because of observer restructuring, potential funding limitations and the introduction of electronic monitoring. Ensure that data collected provides a valid representation of the catch and can be compared easily to the previous data collection methods and time series remain intact. Because there have been no changes to data collection protocols and funding limitations and representativeness are addressed through the annual deployment and review process, this project will focus on potential corrections for the halibut fishery not being observed prior to 2013.	This project was moved to here from the research priorities list where it was originally listed as "Urgent". Staff have not yet been assigned to this project.
Projects in NMFS Development or Review (Council has taken action or major work at current stage is NMFS's responsibility)			
14	Observer provider insurance requirements	In May 2015, NMFS determined that some observer provider insurance requirements in § 679.52(b)(11)(vi) are inapplicable and should be removed or revised. NMFS National Observer Program (NOP) staff hosted a workshop in Nov 2016. The NOP published a tech memo in November 2017 and a request for information in the Federal Register on July 16, 2018 with comments invited through September 14, 2018 regarding possible insurance packages and cost that could address observers, observer providers, and the fishing industry concerns in the event of an occupational injury.	NMFS HQ staff continue to gather additional information to prepare a Regulatory Impact Review to modify observer provider insurance requirements. The FMAC received an update on the status of this project in May 2019. A proposed rule is expected in 2019 with a final rule to follow in 2020.

Projects in NMFS Development or Review (Continued)			
15	Observer fee rulemaking	In October 2017, the Council initiated an analysis to consider raising the observer fee. The analysis is a response to low sampling rates in partial coverage.	The Council took final action on this item in October 2019, choosing a fee increase to 1.65 percent as their preferred alternative. A final rule is expected to publish in 2020, and the new fee would be implemented in 2021.
16	Record keeping regulatory changes	Observer Provider Portal and Small CP request process changes.	NMFS would develop an RIR and regulatory change in consultation with the FMAC and the Council.
Projects in Council Review (Council or NMFS have tasked staff and scheduled review at a future Council or FMAC meeting)			
17	Sablefish Discards	Since April 2018, a regulatory change that would allow discarding of small sablefish in the Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) sablefish fishery has been discussed as a potential tool to mitigate economic impacts to the fishery while also accounting for possible population-level impacts to the sablefish spawning stock during years of very large sablefish recruitment.	The Council reviewed discussion papers in October 2018, April 2019, and December 2019. This project is scheduled for full initial review in October 2020. This project includes a request for an evaluation of discard estimates including information on lengths, number, and mortality rates, based on observer and EM data.
18	Shoreside Sampling	In May 2019, the FMAC partial coverage subgroup identified information needed to scope the next steps toward an integrated and cost efficient partial coverage monitoring program. Shoreside sampling was identified as one tool to be considered.	The FMAC requests the Council task staff to scope a shoreside sampling program in the partial coverage category. Council staff were tasked to this project in June 2019. No NMFS staff have been assigned to work on this project.
19	Change tender trip definition, consider deploying observers from tenders	In October 2017, the Council initiated an analysis to look at changing the definition of a tender trip to start a new trip with each delivery to a tender or to limit the number of deliveries that can be made before a vessel must log back into ODDS. The analysis should also evaluate options to deploy observers at sea from tenders.	Initial scoping of a similar action was undertaken in 2015-2016, before the analysis was tabled. In December 2018, the Council received a summary of progress on this project and recommended no further action at that time. No staff have been assigned to work on this project.