

Excerpt from 9/16/13 Draft Joint Groundfish Plan Team meeting, September 11 – 12, 2013

## Observer Deployment Plan

Craig Faunce described the 2014 Draft Annual Deployment Plan (ADP) for observers in the groundfish and halibut fisheries off Alaska. The ADP documents how NMFS intends to deploy observers in 2014. The restructured observer program was launched on January 1 and the first 16 weeks of the program were reviewed in June 2013 (this review will recur annually). The Council responded to that report with several recommended analyses, which the draft 2014 ADP responds to. The ADP will be finalized following the October Council meeting. For example, the Council requested an analysis of the amount of trips and lengths of trips for operations during two-month intervals in 2013 in order to evaluate the vessel-selection stratum. Shortening the duration of observation for these boats was not adopted due to a variety of factors; the most compelling factor was that realized sampling fractions of vessels have not met expected sampling fractions in every period examined.

The draft 2014 ADP also evaluated the anticipated deployment rates for trip- and vessel-selection strata given the anticipated 2014 budget and 2012 effort using the same simulation method as used last year. A new analysis compared methods to collect salmon genetic tissues for determining stock of origin in the Gulf of Alaska. The systematic sampling approach of every  $n^{\text{th}}$  salmon proposed by Pella and Geiger (2009) was presented as unattainable in the Gulf of Alaska trawl pollock fishery and is costly to attempt. Instead an alternative approach is proposed whereby salmon bycatch genetics are obtained by the vessel observer on randomly selected trips or vessels. From simulations, the alternative salmon sampling approach for the Gulf of Alaska would have resulted in more salmon obtained at a lower cost. If the at-sea deployment of observers was a random sample of the fleets' activities, unbiased estimates of salmon stock structure for the Gulf of Alaska should result, though the effective sample size is unknown with respect to each stock of origin.

Some issues were raised as to whether the restructured program is performing as intended. For example operators in trip-selection can now self-select the order of their trips and there is an observer effect with respect to tender operations. Furthermore, there was concern that vessel-selection had devolved into a "coalition of the willing", whereby no attempt by NMFS to obtain a random sample of vessels would result in a different group of vessels actually observed (only the same cooperative vessels are observed every time). There is an additional question of fairness in vessel-selection, since selection of vessels for a period is limited to the group that fished the two-month interval during the last year (so new vessels or those that did not fish the previous year have no chance of being picked). A possible alternative is pre-registration prior to selection for coverage as is done in State of Alaska crab fisheries.

The sampling rates for 2014 are anticipated to be below what was anticipated for 2013, and actual rates of coverage in 2013 for the vessel-selection stratum have not met NMFS targets. Further sampling biases likely are occurring as a secondary effect to the factors discussed.

**The Plan Teams recommend that the sampling schemes be reviewed thoroughly and that necessary adjustments be made to 1) minimize the ability of operators to avoid observer coverage and 2) increase the overall sample size (i.e., remove program loopholes).**

The Plan Team report will be provided to the Observer Advisory Committee in time for consideration at its September 18 - 19, 2013 meeting and to the Council at its October 2013 meeting.