



Fishery Monitoring and Advisory Committee

REPORT

May 19th, 2020, 8am-4pm, ADT

Committee: Bill Tweit (co-chair), Nicole Kimball (co-chair), Julie Bonney, Beth Concepcion, Tom Evich, Dan Falvey, Stacey Hansen, Julie Kavanaugh, Michael Lake, Chad See, Abby Snedeker, Luke Szymanski, Abigail Turner-Franke, Caitlin Yaeger, Bob Alverson, Kathy Hansen, Chad See

Agency staff: Kate Haapala (NPFMC), Maria Davis (NPFMC), Diana Evans (NPFMC), Anna Henry (NPFMC), Jennifer Mondragon (NMFS), Maggie Chan (NMFS), Cathy Tide (NMFS), Brett Alger (NMFS), Lauren Bonatakis (NMFS), Jennifer Ferdinand (FMA), Lisa Thompson (FMA), Gwynne Schnaittacher (FMA), Geoff Mayhew (PSMFC), Sherri Dressel (ADFG)

Other attendees included: Troy Quinlan (TechSea) and Ernie Weiss (AEB)

At this meeting, the Fishery Monitoring and Advisory Committee (FMAC) discussed COVID-19 issues related to observer deployment and data collection in the full and partial coverage fleets. The meeting served as a forum for dialogue among multiple stakeholders and agency staff to address current challenges, as well as receive updates on the 2021 Annual Deployment Plan (ADP) and 2019 Annual Report.

1. Introduction

The co-chairs of the FMAC opened the meeting with introductions and Kate Haapala gave an overview of the agenda.

Kate Haapala gave a brief update on Council actions related to fishery monitoring since the last meeting of the FMAC in September 2019 and the meeting of the Partial Coverage FMAC in January 2020. The update highlighted the Council's motion from October 2019 raising the [observer fee](#) percentage from 1.25% to 1.65%, and a second motion prioritizing work on [cost efficiencies](#) in the partial coverage observer program. The Council's October 2019 motion on cost efficiencies tasked work on pelagic trawl EM combined with shoreside sampling, the development of an integrated monitoring plan for fixed gear, and optimizing the size and composition of the fixed gear observed and EM fleets.

In response to the Council's October motions, staff prepared a workplan on cost efficiency options for the partial coverage observer program and presented it to the Council at the January 2020 meeting. At the January 2020 Council meeting the Council [adopted](#) three priorities for continued and newly initiated work on cost efficiencies in the partial coverage observer program: 1) continued support for the pelagic trawl EM EFP; 2) integration of EM into the overall monitoring of fixed gear and evaluation of the baseline observer coverage needed to inform fixed

gear EM; and 3) an evaluation of different criteria to define the ‘zero selection’ pool to meet both data needs and improve cost efficiency. **The Council’s January 2020 motion provides important direction for the agency’s work on the 2021 ADP to develop a more cost efficient approach to partial coverage that meets data needs and can be supported by industry fees.**

2. Changes to Observer Deployment and Sampling Protocols due to COVID-19

The FMAC received an update from Jennifer Ferdinand (FMA) on the agency’s response to COVID-19 including changes to divisional operations (e.g., staff transition to telework, decreases in staff availability due to personal needs, redirection of staff priorities to addressing COVID related challenges, and reconfiguring observer training and debriefing for virtual completion).

- a. **Observer training:** Prior to transitioning to telework, the agency was able to complete observer training in March but suspended April training courses. The agency is at least one training class behind but has redesigned the observer training program to a blended model, with the majority completed virtually followed by one week of in-person training. The reduced numbers of trained observers (estimated to be between 30-70 observers) could create a labor shortage for observer providers, depending on when and how the agency reintroduces observer deployment in the partial coverage observer program. The agency is working to reduce in-person contact between staff, observers, and vessel crewmembers related to observer training and deployment. Specifically, the agency is conducting remote observer briefings, allowing observers deployed in the Pacific hake fishery to debrief remotely and travel to Alaska as a North Pacific observer, and using briefing waivers as appropriate to rapidly deploy observers in good standing.
- b. **Observer travel:** COVID-19 has introduced inter and intra-state travel restrictions which have significantly reduced the agency’s capacity to deploy observers. Travel restrictions coupled with mandatory social distancing requirements have led the agency to develop protocols for no-contact installations for ATLAS data transmission systems in Kodiak and Seattle, no-contact observer sample station inspections, and remote briefings. FMA has supported keeping observers in Alaska whenever possible to reduce travel and potential exposure to COVID-19; the FMAC’s discussion emphasized that observer companies have been supportive.
- c. **Observer quarantine and testing:** The FMAC discussed different options for ensuring observer and crew safety in relation to best practices for completing quarantine. FMAC discussion highlighted the rapidly evolving safety and public health mandates which pose challenges to fishermen, the agency, and observer providers alike as they work to coordinate effective responses. The FMAC and agency reviewed two **options for crew and observer quarantine: 1) an observer who has undergone the mandatory 14-day quarantine in port and is asymptomatic or tested negative for COVID-19 could join a vessel whose crew have undergone a 14-day quarantine and are asymptomatic or tested negative for COVID-19; 2) an observer could be picked up from port and quarantine with vessel crew if all are in the same stages of quarantine.** FMA noted North Pacific observers will follow the protocol and plans a vessel has submitted to the

State of Alaska, including meeting all requirements of [Mandate 017](#) if applicable to the vessel. FMA has asked that observers are held to the same standard as the vessel crew. Observer providers reported that they default to each vessel's safety plan, although each provider has their own community and workforce protection plan submitted to the State, which includes their own evacuation plan should an observer become symptomatic while the vessel is at sea.

- d. **Sampling protocols:** Observer sampling protocols have changed for catcher vessels delivering pollock in the Bering Sea to reduce contact between crew and observers and shoreside plant workers. NMFS and providers are trying to accommodate additional shoreside observers because vessel-based observers are no longer following deliveries into the plant for sorting and sampling. This change works to ensure minimal interaction between plant personnel and vessel personnel.
- e. **Fishery dependent data:** The agency has continued to issue an emergency waiver for the partial coverage observer program except for vessels departing from Kodiak (the current expiration date is [May 31st, 2020](#)). COVID-19 has also brought on reduced fishing effort early in the year for some partial coverage fisheries, leading to a scenario where there has thus far been relatively little partial coverage observer data collected in the calendar year 2020. In addition, the agency has made alterations in in-season management to use EM data, and notes that EM data is delayed compared to observer information, simply because of the mail-in process.

3. Vessel Safety Examinations Updates

The FMAC received an update from Jennifer Ferdinand on the Coast Guard's Commercial Fishing Vessel Safety examination plans responsive to COVID-19. Ms. Ferdinand's update highlighted that the Coast Guard is allowing virtual checks of life-saving equipment as part of a process to defer the full examination. This deferment extends the expiration date of the vessel's safety decal for 90 days. In ports with low bandwidth, the Coast Guard will conduct vessel safety inspections over the phone. Where the Coast Guard has examiners who can come to a vessel in person, they will try to do the complete exam if all members aboard the vessel have undergone a 14-day quarantine and are asymptomatic. The Coast Guard is prioritizing exams on vessels which require observer coverage.

The FMAC also received an update from Jennifer Mondragon (NMFS) on changes to flow scale inspections. Some flow scale inspections have occurred in January, but the freezer longline inspections conducted in early summer out of Dutch Harbor and Seattle have been delayed due to quarantine and travel restrictions.

4. Full Coverage Issues

Jennifer Ferdinand provided an update on the issues currently facing the full coverage fleets, and thanked industry representatives for working closely with the agency as all parties work to address emerging challenges related to COVID-19.

- a. **CGOA rockfish:** This fishery had a slow start in 2020. Vessels are facing operational challenges with increased transportation costs and reduced market prices. The agency and observer providers relied on the April training class to cover the CGOA rockfish fishery. Unlike the Bering Sea pollock fishery which usually operates by having at-sea observers transfer to the plant during shoreside deliveries for counting and sampling, CGOA rockfish observers can stay onboard the vessel and reduce their interaction with plant personnel.
- b. **Freezer longline fleet:** The agency is working toward transitioning its Lead Level 2 (LL2) class to the virtual environment. Industry noted the flow scale inspections have thus far gone smoothly. Some vessels are pushing back the start of their B season to see if there is greater operational and market security, which is also helping ensure that there are enough LL2 qualified observers.
- c. **Amendment 80:** The Amendment 80 fleet observers have been asked to stay with their vessels, similar to the AFA fleet. Industry noted their vessels operate year round and have not been as impacted as the pulse fisheries, such as CGOA rockfish.
- d. **B season AFA Pollock:** To increase flexibility and safety, the agency is allowing observers in the Pacific hake fishery to conduct remote debriefings, or be permitted a briefing waiver depending on the observer's experience, before traveling to Alaska to work as an Alaskan observer in the B season Pollock fishery. Observer providers noted that some B season pollock observers are already in Akutan and have agreed to stay in Akutan through the end of the B season to reduce travel and exposure. All observers will undergo a 14-day quarantine.

5. Partial Coverage Issues

Jennifer Ferdinand provided the agency's early ideas on a proposal to reintroduce observer coverage in the partial coverage observer program in July at the earliest. The agency is developing a plan as it anticipates the emergency waiver for observer requirements in the partial coverage observer program to be removed as travel restrictions ease and observer training resumes. **The proposal under consideration has two main elements and would constitute a mid-year change to the 2020 ADP.**

Currently, the partial coverage observer program deploys observers based on randomized trip selection. A trip is randomly selected once a vessel logs an upcoming trip in ODDS 72 hours before it embarks. This model does not give the agency or observer providers enough time to ensure a 14-day quarantine can be met by observers and crew and requires observers to move from vessel to vessel frequently. **The agency is considering moving towards a vessel selection model. Under this alternative model, if a vessel is selected for coverage in ODDS, every trip taken by that vessel would be selected for coverage under a specified time period.** The agency stressed it is only beginning to understand the feasibility of this model, but provided supporting rationale by describing its potential to collect at-sea observer data while reducing observer mobility. The agency also suggested this approach could allow an observer to be bound to a particular geographic area or port similar to crew so as to limit their travel and exposure.

The second component proposes to raise fixed gear EM coverage from the current 30% rate to 100% due to reduced fishing effort across multiple partial coverage fisheries (e.g., due to reduced market prices, TAC reductions, or fishery closures) and the emergency waivers granting partial coverage vessels departing from ports other than Kodiak exemption. Because the agency anticipates less data being collected in the partial coverage fleets in the 2020 calendar year, using a 100% fixed gear EM coverage rate could help to fill data gaps where no observer coverage exists.

The FMAC had significant discussion on the agency's proposal, raising several points for consideration, but overall appreciated the agency bringing these new ideas forward to the committee. The bullet points below capture FMAC member's comments and considerations.

- It would not be equitable to require voluntary fixed gear EM participants to undergo a 100% coverage rate when observed trips are not held to a similar rate, and it represents a significant deviation from the expectations when they signed up for the program. Suggestions included looking for solutions that were not based on a mandatory 100% rate, but still provided increased amounts of data.
- Delays in when fixed gear EM data are received and reviewed affect in-season management choices. FMAC discussion noted it is important to consider the timeliness of receiving and reviewing fixed gear EM data at the current 30% coverage rate, and especially if the fixed gear EM coverage rate is increased to cover data gaps.
- The FMAC discussed whether it was possible to change observer protocols to focus their effort on filling data gaps (i.e., capturing biological data for targeted species), and for the agency to target vessels that would provide those data rather than using randomized selection. The agency emphasized changing observer protocols at this magnitude would take significant time and staff resources and likely be infeasible.
- Using vessel selection could result in a shift in fishing effort to vessels not selected for observer coverage.
- The FMAC discussed the utility of using a geographic cluster approach where an observer would be deployed out of a primary port (i.e., Cordova or Kodiak) and stay within that region. This approach could reduce the spread or quantity of spatially representative data in the partial coverage fleet and continue to be in accordance with current State of Alaska health mandates.
- FMAC members encouraged the agency to develop guidelines or practices for creating "safety envelopes" around different personnel groups, such as plant workers and fishermen, for shoreside deliveries and monitoring in the partial coverage fleet.
- Some FMAC members wanted feedback on how the agency would approach deploying observers on partial coverage vessels with more conservative skippers who have taken additional steps (i.e., suspended crew walk-on policies) to protect their crew and families. The agency emphasized their expectation that crew and observers are held to the same safety/quarantine standards, and an observer provider emphasized their protective plans to restrict observer movement in port communities.
- **The FMAC encourages the agency to consider early outreach opportunities to communicate their model for reintroducing observer coverage in the partial**

coverage fleet, including townhall meetings, making use of the Council website and newsletters, and associations such as the United Fishermen of Alaska.

6. Plan for 2021 ADP and 2019 Annual Report

The FMAC received a status update on the 2019 Annual Report and the 2021 ADP. The 2019 Annual Report's publication has been delayed as staff resources have been fully dedicated to addressing COVID-19 issues related to monitoring and observer deployment in the full and partial coverage fleets. **The 2019 Annual Report should be published in June 2020 on the agency and Council website.**

The FMAC discussed the 2021 ADP, noting the agency has not yet dedicated significant resources to this plan. However, the agency does expect in-year changes to the 2020 deployment plan for the partial coverage observer fleet to influence the 2021 ADP. The agency reiterated the Council's January 2020 motion on prioritization of cost efficiencies for the partial coverage fleet provides clear direction for their work on the 2021 ADP moving forward. Under the guidance of the January 2020 motion, the trawl EM EFP continues to be fully supported with staff resources. Due to staff resources being redirected to address COVID-19 issues in the full and partial coverage fleets, the agency does not anticipate being able to undertake additional work on integration of EM into the overall monitoring of fixed gear and evaluation of the baseline observer coverage or an evaluation of different criteria to define the zero selection pool.

FMAC discussion raised several points for consideration related to the 2021 ADP:

- **FMA reported it did not receive the maximum allocation of observer funds for fiscal year 2021, only receiving \$785,326 of the requested \$1 million to support sea days in the partial coverage fleet.** FMA is currently seeking other funding avenues to reach \$1 million in federal funding to support partial coverage observer sea days. There is uncertainty about what this funding shortfall means in a year where fee revenues are also anticipated to be reduced due to lower fishing effort early in 2020 and reduced market prices. It is possible that some observer funding from fiscal year 2020 could be rolled over to fiscal year 2021 if there are monies saved from having a lower at-sea deployment rate due to COVID-19 and the emergency waivers for partial coverage. **Overall, the FMAC agreed the Council should consider planning for addressing a funding shortfall in the future for the partial coverage observer program.**
- The FMAC discussed evaluating different criteria for zero selection in the partial coverage observer fleet. It was suggested the agency consider having fishermen continue to log their trips in ODDS, and then create optimizing criteria based on the vessel's port of embarkment, total catch, or other cost efficiency factor. The optimized group of vessels could then be randomly selected for observer deployment while the non-optimized group of vessels would continue to log their trips but not be selected for coverage that year. **The FMAC agreed that optimizing zero selection is a high priority.**
- Without optimizing the zero selection pool, the FMAC was concerned the agency's proposal to reintroduce observer coverage in the partial coverage fleet (i.e., vessel selection combined with multi-trip selection) could further burden smaller vessels, or be

used to cover vessels taking relatively few trips, or vessels landing relatively low catch. The emergency waiver for partial coverage vessels operating outside the port of Kodiak dramatically increased the zero selection pool for a limited duration of time. While the FMAC recognizes the importance of observer data, there was some question about the tradeoffs of the above concerns and the utility of limited data that may be collected in 2020. **FMAC members encouraged the agency to consider mitigation strategies and not further burden small boat fishermen in a year with exceptional operational challenges.**