

WEST COAST GROUND FISH OBSERVER PROGRAM

Problem Statement

Discarded catch occurs for a variety of reasons including size, unmarketable species, prohibited species and fishery management regulations. For 20 years, the fishery has had regulatory catch limits to slow the pace of landed catch and allow for year-round fishing, processing and marketing opportunities. A result of these trip limits is discarded catch.

Critical Factors

- Both regulatory and market discards are occurring in the groundfish fishery.
- These discards must be monitored in order to accurately determine fishing mortality.
- Accurate information on fishing mortality is necessary to assure accuracy in quota management, stock assessments and allocations among fishing groups.
- The West Coast observer program is designed to obtain information on total catch (landing catch and discard) in the West Coast groundfish fishery.

Status of Research

The observer program currently consists of 30 to 40 observers stationed along the coast from Bellingham, WA to Santa Barbara, CA. Fisheries observers are trained professionals who monitor and record catch data from commercial fishing vessels and processing facilities. Observers collect data on species composition of the catch, weights, disposition of fish caught, seabird sightings and marine mammal interactions. Observers also collect biological data such as sexed fish lengths, weights and aging structures.

Observers are deployed routinely on the permitted trawl and fixed-gear groundfish fleet. The program has also begun deployment of observers on the open-access groundfish fleet. In addition to deploying observers on vessels, the program is exploring alternative means to collect data, such as video monitoring systems. Data collection focuses on determining at-sea discards, which are being integrated into logbook information and fish ticket data on retained catch. The summary of the first year of observer collected discard information will be available in January 2003.

Future Considerations

The open-access fleet is larger than can be fully observed by the existing number of observers. In addition, a large number of open-access vessels cannot accommodate an observer on board. New deployment and observation methods such as "ride along side observers" must be developed to adequately observe the entire open-access fleet. Groundfish are caught and discarded in a number of ancillary fisheries, such as the salmon troll fishery, California halibut fishery and market squid fishery. Additional observers are needed to adequately monitor discards in these fleets.

Key Players

Fishery Resource Analysis & Monitoring (FRAM) Division, NWFSC
Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission
Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Department of Fish and Game
Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

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