

Why a Marine Mammal Observer Program in Alaska?

Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) must determine the impacts that U.S. commercial fisheries have on marine mammal stocks. One way that NMFS does this is through fisheries observer programs. Observer programs are one of the best sources of reliable, objective data on levels of takes of marine mammals incidental to commercial fishing operations.

The summer of 1998 will mark the beginning of the Alaska Marine Mammal Observer Program to monitor incidental takes of marine mammals by commercial fisheries in Alaskan nearshore waters. What sets this program apart from other fisheries observer programs in Alaska is the low level monitoring approach. Observers will only be collecting data for the minimum number of fishing days deemed necessary to gain an adequate level of confidence in the data collected. In fact, fishers may have an observer on-board only a couple of times each season, depending on the fishery.

Although most observers will be making observations from on-board fishing vessels, independent vessel and aerial surveys will supplement observer coverage. Alternating between dock and vessel boardings, observers will be distributed evenly throughout the fleet in order to obtain a representative sample.



What will observers look for?

Experienced biologists will be serving as observers to collect data on many different environmental conditions while aboard your vessel. In addition to recording marine mammal takes, they will be noting related factors such as gear characteristics, fishing methods, environmental conditions, and the presence of birds. (The collection of birds will be done through individual scientific permits that are *not* traceable to a vessel.) This information will help NMFS better understand the factors that contribute to the incidental take of marine mammals. If your fishing operation has little or no



contact with marine mammals, then that will be evident to the observers. If fishing operations result in occasional or frequent serious injuries or mortalities, then this program will assist NMFS and fishery representatives to develop recommendations for reducing take levels that have the least impact on fishing practices. This observer program will also help to verify reports submitted by vessel owners and operators on marine mammal injuries and mortalities.



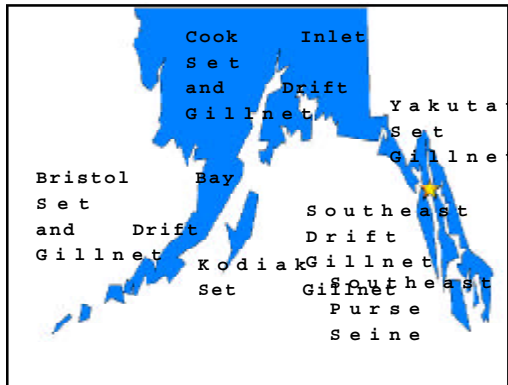
What Does the Law Require?

Under the MMPA, the taking of marine mammals is prohibited. However, U.S. commercial fishers are exempt from this prohibition if they comply with the requirements of the MMPA. NMFS is required by law to place all fisheries into categories based on their levels of serious injuries and mortalities of marine mammals. Fishers in Category I and II fisheries (those with a frequent or occasional level of take) must register annually with NMFS and must carry an observer if requested to do so by NMFS. All fishers, regardless of the category of fishery they participate in, must report all incidental injuries and mortalities of marine mammals to NMFS within 48 hours of the end of a fishing trip.

The MMPA registration process for Alaska fishers was recently integrated with the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game's permit process, thereby eliminating this requirement for Alaska fishers. However, fishers must still report all injuries and mortalities and must carry an observer if requested to do so by NMFS.

Which fisheries will be involved?

This multi-year program will focus on Alaskan fisheries currently placed in **Category II** by NMFS. These fisheries have been determined to have "occasional" incidental serious injuries and mortalities of marine mammals.



LOCATIONS OF ALASKA MARINE MAMMAL OBSERVER PROGRAMS

How can I make this program work for me?

- When observers board your vessel, be sure to tell them about any and all safety issues they might encounter.
- Feel free to ask them any questions you may have about the program or the types of information they'll be collecting while on-board.
- Keep in mind that you are welcome to attend the "open door" meetings that will be regularly hosted by NMFS Observer Program Coordinators in major locations.
- Voicing your comments and criticisms at these meetings is vital to the ongoing improvement of this observer program.

What about insurance?

We know that insurance is a major concern for you. It is for NMFS as well. All observers on-board your vessel will be covered under the standard maritime policy that is used in other fishery observer programs around the country. The observers will be employed by a NMFS contractor and the contractor will be required to carry adequate insurance for each observer.

What if I have questions or concerns?

Regular meetings will be held in major ports on a weekly or monthly basis. These meetings are designed to provide you with an opportunity to meet the NMFS Observer Program Coordinators in your area and address any questions or concerns you may have about the program with them. They will have up-to-date results from observer data collected in your region. This information will also be posted in major ports for public display.

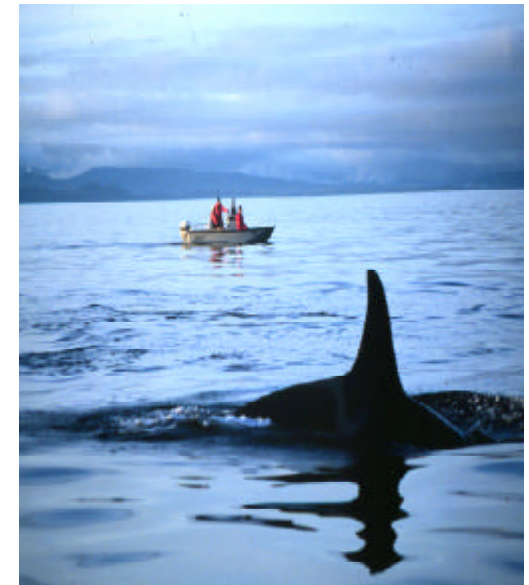
At the end of the fishing season, this data will be analyzed by the NMFS National Marine Mammal Laboratory in Seattle, and the results will be published in a timely manner for public record.

If you are not able to attend these meetings, but have questions or would like additional information about the program, feel free to contact:

Steve Zimmerman
National Marine Fisheries Service
Alaska Regional Office
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668
phone (907) 586-7235
fax (907) 586-7012

All photographs by Mandy Merklein

Alaska Marine Mammal Observer Program



**National Marine Fisheries Service
Juneau, Alaska**