

Collection of Marine Mammal Data by U.S. Observer Programs

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Presentation Abstract:

Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), NOAA Fisheries Service has the authority to place observers on board vessels engaged in commercial fishing operations that incidentally take marine mammals. Data collected by NMFS observer programs are used to assess the level of serious injury and mortality of marine mammals, develop marine mammal stock assessments, and to identify bycatch reduction measures to ensure the recovery and conservation of these species. Ten observer programs are currently conducted, which monitor over 42 fisheries nationwide for incidental take of marine mammals, bycatch of other protected resources, and discards of fish.

Not all fisheries interact with marine mammals and not all programs focus on protected resources (for example, the North Pacific groundfish observer program monitors for total catch of finfish). Fisheries currently monitored under the authority of the MMPA include: Kodiak set-gillnet (Category III), California/Oregon pelagic drift gillnet (Category I), California pelagic longline (Category I), Southern California set gillnet (Category II), Mid-Atlantic gillnet (Category II), New England and Mid-Atlantic small mesh trawl (Category I), New England groundfish trawl and gillnet fisheries (Category II), Mid-Atlantic *Illex* squid trawl (Category I), Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean pelagic longline (Category I), Southeast shark gillnet (Category II), and the North Carolina coastal gillnet (Category I).

Regional observer programs are responsible for the development of observer data collection forms, including forms for collecting marine mammal incidental takes. Marine mammal data are typically collected using the following types of forms:

- Incidental Take Form- for documentation of species, type of marine mammal take, and deterrents used.
- Biological Information Form- for documentation of species, length, weight, sex, and tissue/teeth samples for fisheries permitted under 50 CFR 229.7.
- Sightings Form- for documentation of species, number of animals, and behavior for animals near or around fishing gear.
- Photos and comments are also recorded to provide further information on marine mammal incidental takes.

Each observer program's training manual contains detailed information on data collection forms and procedures¹. There is no national standardized format for these manuals. In addition to the information collected on marine mammals, observers also collect a variety of data on other species such as gear type, fishing location, estimated weight of retained and discarded catch, species composition of discarded catch, reasons for discard, weight, length, sex, dissections from

¹ Training manuals can be found online at: www.st.nmfs.gov/st4/nop/Observer_training_resources.html

tagged fish, socioeconomic data, biological samples, and seabird and sea turtle interactions. Data collection on protected species is the top priority for all regional observer programs.

When considering changes to current marine mammal data collection procedures, it is important to remember there are a number of inherent tradeoffs. For example, observer programs must balance the collection of more data, the need to provide high quality data for all species of interest, improvements in data management and processing, and cost. Observer programs strive to provide the best data possible to aid in the conservation and protection of marine mammals and other species, and are willing to work with protected resources experts to identify possible improvements in observer data collection.