



## NOAA FISHERIES

### Sustainable Fisheries

#### To Find More Information:

- For more detailed information on the Observer Program and the Observer Program regulations, please visit:  
<http://www.alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/sustainablefisheries/observers/>
- For more detailed information on the duties and responsibilities of observers, please visit:  
<http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/FMA/>

## Summary of Upcoming Changes to the North Pacific Groundfish and Halibut Observer Program

### Overview

The North Pacific Groundfish and Halibut Observer Program (Observer Program) has had a vital role in the management of North Pacific groundfish fisheries since the program started over 20 years ago. The information collected by observers provides scientific information for managing the groundfish fisheries and minimizing bycatch. High caliber observer information is the cornerstone of Alaska groundfish fisheries management, however the quality and utility of the information was deficient because some boats were not being observed and the structure for deploying observers was flawed. Therefore, beginning in January 2013, the new Observer Program goes into effect and makes important changes to how observers are deployed, how observer coverage is funded, and the vessels and processors that must have some or all of their operations observed. These changes will increase the statistical reliability of data collected by the program, address cost inequality among fishery participants, and expand observer coverage to previously unobserved fisheries. This change is necessary to successfully manage our Alaskan fishery resources.

### Background

The Observer Program provides the regulatory framework for NMFS-certified observers (observers) to obtain information necessary for the conservation and management of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands and Gulf of Alaska groundfish fisheries. The information collected by observers provides the best available scientific information for managing the fisheries and developing measures to minimize bycatch. Observers collect biological samples and fishery-dependent information on total catch and interactions with protected species. Managers use data collected by observers to monitor quotas, manage groundfish and prohibited species catch, and document and reduce fishery interactions with protected resources. Scientists use observer-collected data for stock assessments and marine ecosystem research.

Observer requirements for fisheries off Alaska have been in place since the mid-1970s and have remained mostly unchanged since the Observer Program was implemented in 1990. In October of 2010, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) took final action to restructure the Observer Program and change existing observer coverage requirements for commercial vessels and processing plants operating in federal groundfish and halibut fisheries off Alaska. More information on the history of the Observer Program, the Council's preferred alternative, and details of the requirements and provisions of the new Observer Program can be found in the proposed rule for this action, which was published in the *Federal Register* on April 18, 2012 (77 FR 23326), and is posted on the NMFS Alaska Region website <http://www.alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/sustainablefisheries/observers/>. The regulations

and final rule implementing the new Observer Program will be posted on this website after publication in the *Federal Register* later this year.

## New Observer Program

The new Observer Program will allow NMFS to determine when and where to deploy observers according to management and conservation needs, with funds provided through a system of fees based on the retained value of groundfish and halibut in fisheries covered by the new program. The new program is designed to reduce sources of bias that currently jeopardize the statistical reliability of catch and bycatch data collected by the Observer Program. The new program will also address longstanding concerns about cost inequality among fishery participants and expands observer coverage into currently unobserved fisheries.

All sectors of the groundfish fishery, including vessels less than 60 feet length overall (LOA) and the commercial halibut sector, will be included in the new Observer Program. Coverage levels will no longer be based on vessel length and processing volume; rather, NMFS will have the flexibility to decide when and where to deploy observers based on a scientifically defensible deployment plan.

The new Observer Program places all vessels and processors in the groundfish and halibut fisheries off Alaska into one of two observer coverage categories: (1) a full coverage category, and (2) a partial coverage category.

## Full Observer Coverage

You are in the full coverage category if you own or operate a —

- catcher/processor (with limited exceptions)
- mothership
- catcher vessel while participating in AFA or CDQ pollock fisheries
- catcher vessel while participating in CDQ groundfish fisheries (except: sablefish; and pot or jig gear catcher vessels)
- catcher vessel while participating in the Central Gulf of Alaska Rockfish Program
- inshore processor when receiving or processing Bering Sea pollock

Vessels and processors in the full coverage category will obtain observers by contracting directly with observer providers. This will represent no change for many participants in the full coverage category. However, there will be some new entrants to the full coverage category since all catcher/processors are now included.

## Partial Observer Coverage

You are in the partial coverage category if you own or operate a —

- catcher vessel designated on a Federal Fisheries Permit (FFP) when directed fishing for groundfish in federally managed or parallel fisheries, except those in the full coverage category
- catcher vessel when fishing for halibut IFQ or CDQ
- catcher vessel when fishing for sablefish IFQ or fixed gear sablefish CDQ
- shoreside or stationary floating processor, except those in the full coverage category

In addition, the following catcher/processors may be included in the partial observer coverage category: (1) catcher/processors less than 60 ft. LOA with a history of catcher/processor and catcher vessel activity in a single year from January 1, 2003, through January 1, 2010; (2) any catcher/processor with an average daily groundfish production of less than 5,000 pounds round weight equivalent in the most recent full calendar year of operation from January 1, 2003, to January 1, 2010; or (3) catcher/processors that processed no more than one metric ton round weight of

groundfish on any day (up to a maximum of 365 mt per year) in the previous calendar year.

Vessels and processors in the partial coverage category will see substantial changes in how observers are deployed and paid for. If you have previously taken observers under the old 30 percent coverage rules, please note that those requirements are being removed and you will only be required to take partial observer coverage when you are selected through the Observer Declare and Deploy System (ODDS), which is described below. You will no longer contract independently with an observer provider.

### Three pools of partial coverage

NMFS will implement the partial coverage program by placing vessels into three pools with differing requirements. These pools and requirements are as follows:

1. **Trip Selection pool.** This category applies to all catcher vessels of any length fishing with trawl gear, and to hook-and-line and pot gear vessels that are greater than or equal to 57.5 feet LOA. Each fall, owners of vessels placed in this pool will receive a letter that lists their vessels assigned to this pool and describes how to access and log trips into ODDS. Vessel owners or operators whose vessel/s is in this selection pool will be required to log each fishing trip into ODDS. On logging your trip, you will be immediately informed if the trip has been randomly selected for observer coverage. If the logged fishing trip is selected, then the vessel must take an observer on that trip. The observer will be provided by a NMFS contractor. Vessel owners or operators in this pool must log fishing trips at least 72 hours before anticipated departure.
2. **Vessel Selection pool.** This category applies to catcher vessels fishing with hook-and-line and pot gear that are less than 57.5 feet LOA and, for the first year, greater than or equal to 40 feet LOA. Each fall, owners of vessels placed in this pool will receive a letter that lists their vessels assigned to this pool. Vessel owners or operators in this pool will not be required to log trips into ODDS. However, a subset of vessels, randomly selected by NMFS, will be required to take observers for every groundfish or halibut fishing trip that occurs during a specified 2-month period. Owners of selected vessels will be contacted by NMFS at least 30 days in advance of the 2-month period.
3. **Zero Coverage pool.** In the first year of the program, this category applies to all vessels less than 40 feet LOA and catcher vessels fishing with jig gear. Vessel owners or operators in this pool will not be required to take observers for the first year of the program. Landings from vessels with zero coverage will still be assessed the landing fee.

FFP holders will not be required to carry observers while they fish in the State of Alaska guideline harvest level groundfish fisheries.

### Fees

Observer coverage in the partial coverage category will be funded through revenue generated from a fee. Landings from all vessels in the partial coverage category will be assessed a 1.25% fee on standard ex-vessel prices of the landed catch weight of groundfish and halibut. The fee percentage is set in regulation and will be reviewed periodically by the Council after the second year of the program.

The fee will be assessed on all halibut and any fish landed that are subtracted from a federal groundfish total allowable catch limit. The fee will be split between the processor or Registered Buyer and the vessel owner or operator. The processor or Registered Buyer will collect the vessel operator's share of the fee at the time of landing and remit the fee to NMFS each year. The money generated by this fee will be used to pay for observer coverage on the vessels and processors in the partial coverage category in the following year.

## Electronic Monitoring

During the first year of the new Observer Program, carrying an electronic monitoring (EM) system instead of a human observer will not be an option. NMFS is developing EM technologies in conjunction with Saltwater, Inc., to collect catch, discard, and fishing effort data aboard commercial vessels. Operators of vessels in the Vessel Selection pool may volunteer to assist in this study. The number of EM units is limited in the first year; therefore, not all operators who volunteer will be provided EM equipment. Selected vessels will be eligible to carry EM equipment for a set period of time when fishing. Once completed, the equipment and video footage will be removed, and we will provide you a copy of any data collected from your vessel.