

National Observer Program Communications and Outreach Strategy



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National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
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1. Overview

1.1 Science and Stewardship

The work of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) National Observer Program (NOP) directly supports NOAA's mission of providing stewardship of living marine resources through science-based conservation and management, and the protection and restoration of healthy ecosystems. NMFS' Observer Programs currently deploy approximately 600 observers annually to collect scientific and economic data in more than 40 commercial fisheries. Observer data is widely considered one of the best sources of data for use in fisheries conservation and management.

1.2 Communication and Partnerships

NOAA emphasizes the importance of communication and outreach both within the agency and to stakeholder audiences (NOAA's Strategic Plan for FY2006 – FY2011). NOAA's Strategic Plan stresses the importance of its outreach mission by formalizing the agency's commitment to these activities in the Engage, Advise and Inform Strategy. Improving outreach and communications is a high priority activity for the Administration. Because observer data is used for a variety of scientific and regulatory purposes and involves a wide variety of stakeholders, the need for a clear national level communications strategy is clear. Without an effective outreach strategy, stakeholders may not clearly understand the importance of observer programs or their relationship to fisheries management.

By developing the NOP Communications and Outreach Strategy ("Outreach Strategy"), NMFS observer programs are working as a part of NOAA-wide efforts to enhance outreach and communications. The objectives of the NOP Outreach Strategy are to outline a strategy that supports both national and regional outreach needs for NMFS observer programs, identify and build upon existing observer program outreach efforts, and to communicate the mission and goals of NMFS' observer programs.

1.3 Observer Program Structure

Observer programs are coordinated at the national level through NMFS's Office of Science and Technology/National Observer Program (NOP). In addition to handling program administration, budgeting, and planning, the NOP works on issues of national policy and observer data quality standards. The NOP also provides regional observer programs with a forum to increase communication. All regional programs and NMFS Offices participate in the National Observer Program Advisory Team (NOPAT), which serves as an advisory board. The NMFS Science Board approves NOPAT recommendations, with final decisions made by the Director of the Office of Science and

Technology, Chief Science Advisor, and Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, when necessary.

Regional programs are responsible for the day-to-day operation of fishery observer programs. Program scientists determine the appropriate sampling protocols and necessary observer coverage levels for each fishery. In general, regional programs work with private contracting companies to recruit and deploy observers. All new observers are provided with training in species identification, sampling methods, and safety. Following a fishing trip, observers are debriefed, and the trip's data is quality checked before it is entered into a database system and made available to regional fisheries biologists for use in assessment and management.

1.4 Current Status of Observer Program Outreach

At present, outreach is accomplished at each region and by the NOP. Efforts include program websites, informational brochures, presentations at Fishery Management Council and interstate Fisheries Commission meetings, presence at Fish Expo and other industry forums, stakeholder meetings, Congressional briefings, journal articles, "Fisheries Observer" artwork developed by Ray Troll (a popular fish artist), and other materials.

The need for a cohesive strategy in NMFS' observer program outreach efforts was brought to the attention of the agency in a recent review of NMFS observer programs by the Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General (OIG). The OIG recommended that NMFS develop an outreach strategy that includes guidance that regional program managers can use to establish and reach their outreach goals. The OIG specifically stressed the need to increase program outreach efforts to the fishing industry.

In response to these recommendations, the NOP contracted with ICF consultants to review current outreach materials and strategies and to provide a written report summarizing their findings. The report from ICF describes observer program target audiences and recommends "best practice" approaches that should be utilized by regional observer programs in communications and outreach. Additionally, the NOP hired a communications coordinator (see Appendix A for contact information) to develop a NOP Outreach Strategy. The outreach strategy will guide activities at the national level, while the coordinator will provide support to regional programs by facilitating information exchange and will carry out national level outreach activities.

2. The Observer Program Communications and Outreach Strategy

Outreach is defined as two-way communication between the agency and the public to establish and foster mutual understanding, promote public involvement, and influence behaviors, attitudes and actions with the goal of improving the foundations for

stewardship. Instituting this interactive connection with external constituencies provides a reciprocal benefit that is essential to accomplishing the mission of NMFS.¹

Observer program outreach should build relationships with internal and external partners and stakeholders, provide timely and accurate information; maintain a clear and consistent message; and increase target audience awareness and visibility of what observer programs are, what they do, and how the work of NMFS observers programs benefit the nation as a whole.

2.1 Developing an Observer Program Outreach Strategy

The outreach strategy will aid the NOP in developing and utilizing outreach materials, communicating a consistent message across programs and target audiences, and will assist in programmatic planning and budgeting. It identifies fundamental principles that will continue to shape observer program outreach in the future and will be periodically revisited as needs and practices change so that it remains a relevant, flexible document.

Outreach and communications strategies are in place for all six NMFS regions (Northeast, Southeast, Alaska, Northwest, Southwest, and Pacific Islands). The NOP recognizes that each Region has an outreach and communication strategy in place, which may include observer programs. The goal of the NOP outreach strategy is not replace existing outreach plans or the roles and responsibilities of regional outreach staff. The NOP Outreach Strategy will establish national program goals and objectives to move the outreach efforts of headquarters and regional observer programs in a common direction. The NOP Outreach Strategy will make materials developed by regional programs available to all regions, identify target audiences at the national level, and describe high level program messages that are consistent across regions. The role of the NOP is to provide overall communication, facilitation and coordination for observer programs; therefore, all national outreach efforts, as recommended by the NOP and the NOPAT, will be conducted in coordination with regional outreach initiatives and objectives. Regional outreach coordinators should also provide input into the development of national outreach recommendations and development and review of national communications materials.

The NOP Outreach Strategy document is divided into three sections. The first section identifies broad messages and goals for national outreach. The second section defines the role of the NOP in communicating with target audiences. The third section outlines a how the NOP Outreach Strategy will be implemented on an annual basis.

2.2 National Messages

The following sections describe high-level national messages that communicate the mission and goals of the NOP and may be used in outreach materials.

¹ *from NMFS' Northeast Region's Outreach Strategic Plan*

2.2.1 Mission of the National Observer Program

The mission of the NOP is to provide a formalized mechanism for NOAA Fisheries to address observer issues of national importance and to develop policies and procedures to ensure that NOAA Fisheries observers and observer programs are fully supported. The policies must reflect the diverse needs of regional observer programs while enhancing data quality and achieving consistency in key areas of national importance.

2.2.2 Objectives of the National Observer Program

- Coordinate the NOP Advisory Team.
- Communicate and advocate the mission of the NOP and each regional observer program.
- Develop and support national standards and policies to create high quality, cost effective, efficient, and productive observer programs.
- Characterize and qualify the activities and resources of NOAA Fisheries observer programs and advocate for full support

2.2.3 National Themes

To promote a consistent, across-the-board message, observer program outreach efforts should incorporate the following overarching programmatic themes, which build upon the program's stated mission and objectives.

- Everyone benefits from credible, robust observer programs because the collection and application of observer data in fisheries management contributes to sustainable fisheries;
- Fishery managers depend on observer data to reduce bycatch and to restore depleted fish, marine mammal, and protected species populations;
- Collecting the most complete, unbiased, and relevant data requires cooperation between fishery managers, the fishing industry, observers, and scientists;
- Many distinct observer programs exist, but all observer programs share a common purpose: to provide reliable scientific data that promotes healthy marine ecosystems and supports the best use of the nation's marine resources; and
- The NOP provides a coordination function for all regional observer programs to address common issues.

2.2.4 National Goals

The NOP Outreach Strategy sets forth the following goals to guide the NOP and regional observer program outreach staff in the development and implementation of the observer program outreach activities:

Goal 1: Review and Update Outreach Strategy

The NOP communications coordinator will work with Regional NOAA Fisheries observer program and outreach staff to review and update the NOP Outreach Strategy periodically. On an annual basis, the communications coordinator will work with Regional observer program outreach staff to evaluate the success of recent outreach activities and to identify new activities that are appropriate for the NOP to facilitate.

Goal 2: Monitor Outreach Performance

The NOP communications coordinator will work with Regional NOAA Fisheries observer program and outreach staff to develop and maintain guidelines for evaluation and review of the NOP Outreach Strategy, as well as for outreach materials.

Goal 3: Increase Accessibility

The NOP communications coordinator will facilitate the sharing of existing outreach materials between regions.

Goal 4: Annual Reporting on Observer Program Activities

The NOP communications coordinator will produce an observer program Annual Report detailing budget, activities, and highlights of NMFS observer programs.

Goal 5: Fund Observer Program Outreach Projects

The NOP communications coordinator will work with NOPAT members and Regional observer program outreach staff to support regional outreach activities.

**National Goals should be revisited and updated as necessary.*

3. National Target Audiences

Target audiences for NOP outreach activities are fishermen, the fishing industry, fishery managers (including other programs within the Agency), observers, Federal and State Legislators and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Raising public awareness of the importance of observer programs is also a priority for the NOP; effective communication with the public cultivates stewardship of marine resources and a commitment to their conservation and management. However, due to budget constraints, expansion of observer program outreach efforts to specifically target the public will be a longer term goal of the NOP.

The following section describes NOP target audiences and the messages that national level outreach efforts should convey as well as best practices methods for reaching these

groups. When developing outreach materials for regional observer programs, regional staff should refer to the report produced by ICF in addition to the NOP Outreach Strategy. The ICF report contains detailed information on target audiences, messages, and “best practice” strategies.

3.1 Target Audiences

Target audiences are listed in alphabetic order. NMFS point-of-contact information for each target audience is listed in Appendix A.

3.1.1 Federal Agencies Utilizing Non-Fisheries Observers

A number of other federal agencies utilize observers to fulfill the monitoring requirements of Biological Opinions issued under the Endangered Species Act. While some programs, such as the platform removal program, are run out of NMFS offices, agencies such as USGS, the Navy, and the Army Corps of Engineers also contract to hire observers. The NMFS observer program has developed detailed safety and training procedures that is available to other agencies to assist in their own programs.

Messages:

- The NOP has detailed observer safety and training resources that it is willing to share with other agencies contracting to hire observers.

Best Practice Strategies

- Provide information when requested

Contact: National Observer Program

3.1.2 Federal and State Legislators

Materials should communicate to Federal and State legislators the contributions of observer programs at the national and regional level by highlighting important observer program activities. The following messages and strategies should be utilized at the national level:

Primary Messages:

- Observers are the “eyes on the ocean,” collecting critical data upon which policies and management decisions are based
- Significant and sustained financial resources are needed to achieve national and regional program goals
- Utilize high-level national themes

Best Practice Strategies

- Include Congress in the distribution of the NOP annual report and/or newsletters and brochures in coordination with Legislative Affairs
- Conduct Congressional staff briefings to keep decision makers informed and current on the issues in coordination with Legislative Affairs

Contact: NMFS Office of Legislative Affairs

3.1.3 Fishermen and the Fishing Industry (including marine recreational fishermen)

Fishermen and the fishing industry are directly connected to the data collection activities of fisheries observers. They are also impacted by management decisions made using observer data. Generally, Regional observer programs serve as the direct link between the fishing industry and the national program. The role of the NOP should be to support these communication activities and facilitate the exchange of successful outreach strategies or materials across regions. However, outreach materials developed at the national level should also address the fishing industry audience. When materials are developed at the national level, the following methods and strategies should be incorporated as appropriate.

Primary Messages:

- Observer programs and data are a vital component- and often legal requirement- of fisheries management that help to ensure sustainable harvests
- Healthy living marine resources = healthy commercial fishing industry
- Observer programs are here to stay
- Collecting the most complete, unbiased and relevant data involves cooperation between fishery managers, the fishing industry, observers, and scientists

Secondary Messages:

- Communicate objectives of observer programs (Appendix #)
- References to specific data collected in a fishery and how data is used in management
- Information on requirements and regulations for observer programs

Best Practice Strategies

- Use the National Sea Grant extension program to help educate the industry and improve industry cooperation with observer programs
- Confirm that fishermen know where to find regulations and regulation summaries
- Communicate the benefits of data collection and commonalities between the NMFS mission and fishermen goals so that fishermen see themselves as marine “stewards”

- Leverage print and broadcast media through reports, press releases, creative interest stories
- Prepare bilingual materials in fishing communities where needed
- Laminate materials (or use waterproof paper) intended for use on vessels to ensure that they are durable

Contact: Regional Observer Program Managers

3.1.4 Fisheries Managers- Councils and Commissions

There are eight fisheries management councils in the U.S., responsible for writing, revising, and carrying-out fishery management plans (FMPs). There are also three fisheries commissions, which serve as a forum for the states and other stakeholders to promote and support policies and actions to conserve, develop, and manage fishery resources. The NOP should support regional outreach efforts by aiding in communication activities and exchange of successful outreach strategies or materials. When appropriate, the NOP should also take the lead in developing outreach materials targeting the councils and commissions with the following messages and utilizing best practice strategies:

Primary Messages

- Collecting the most complete, unbiased and relevant data involves cooperation between fishery managers, the fishing industry, scientists, and observers
- Councils are important outreach channels to fishermen, the fishing industry, state and federal fisheries managers, and the general public
- Observer programs must have the support of fisheries managers to successfully carry out data collection
- Non-confidential data collected by observers is available to councils and commissions to aid in the decision making process

Best Practice Strategies

- Present at council and commission meetings as appropriate
- Develop a one-page fact sheets to provide information on current observer program activities
- Encourage each council to provide a link to the NOP and regional programs on their Web site
- Use the NOP annual report to reach councils

Contact: Office of Sustainable Fisheries

3.1.5 Fisheries Managers: Intra-Agency

Within the regions, outreach coordinators should work to increase the profile of observer programs by communicating their presence, needs, and successes to the region as a

whole. At the national level, the NOP communications coordinator should work with Regional outreach staff and the NOPAT to identify appropriate items for communication to Agency leaders and the greater NOAA community, and should take the lead on communicating national-level activities. In addition, the communications coordinator should work with Regional outreach and observer program staff to complete an annual report, highlighting program activities each fiscal year.

Outreach efforts should incorporate the following messages and utilize the identified best practice strategies as appropriate:

Primary Message

- Observers are the primary independent data source for accurate at-sea fisheries information;
- The data and biological samples supplied by observer programs are often the best means to obtain current data on the status of fishery removals and bycatch of protected species, such as marine mammals, sea turtles, and sea birds;
- Observer programs work closely with many other offices within NMFS;
- Observer programs are an important contributor to the Agency's goals of stewardship of living marine resources through science-based conservation and management and the promotion of healthy ecosystems;

Best Practice Strategies

National level

- Coordinate with Constituent Services and other NOAA and NMFS offices to ensure consistent high-level messages and presence at meetings and events
- Share successes through agency publications, such as "Fish News" and the AA's Weekly Reports;
- Participate in Agency convened communications/outreach/education working groups;
- Present Observer Program successes at high level meetings with the Agency;
- Publish an observer program "Annual Report" highlighting program activities and success stories.

Regional

- Communicate within regional program NOP to ensure coordinated presence at meetings and events

- Participate in Regional Office or Science Center convened communications/outreach/education working groups.
- Share successes within regional program through newsletters/emails etc.
- Share program successes and outreach efforts with NOP through NOP communications coordinator

Contact: NOP communications coordinator, Regional Program Managers, Partnerships and Communications Division (Office of Sustainable Fisheries)

3.1.6 International Observer Programs

Marine resource managers throughout the world utilize fisheries observers to monitor commercial fishing activities and gather scientific information on the condition of fisheries resources. Many regional observer programs deal directly with international programs and have established outreach strategies; however, the NOP is often called upon to represent US fisheries observer programs. Outreach materials targeting international bodies, particularly international observer programs, should incorporate the following messages and best practice strategies.

Primary Messages

- NMFS has developed many resources that could benefit observer programs in other countries. In turn, the US can learn from the experiences of other countries' fishery observer programs.

Best Practice Strategies

- Continue support of and participation in the International Fisheries Observer Conference
- Develop a packet or CD that contains information on NMFS observer programs
- Maintain an updated list of international fishery observer programs
- Provide support to NMFS Office of International Affairs when requested

Contact: NMFS Office of International Affairs.

3.1.7 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Many non-governmental organizations are interested in U.S. fisheries observer programs. A variety of marine conservation groups have utilized observer data in reports and strongly support observer monitoring programs as the most reliable source of data on commercial fisheries. In many cases, NGO's will contact Regional Offices and Centers directly for information on observer program activities. The National Program should assist the Regions by coordinating large data requests and will respond to media requests with a national perspective in addition to providing support for regional outreach efforts and facilitating the exchange of information across regions. When outreach occurs at the national level, materials targeting NGOs should be developed that utilize the following messages and strategies;

Primary Messages

- Observer programs need the assistance and cooperation of regional and national NGOs to educate Congress on the importance of observer programs.
- Utilize high-level national themes

Best Practices

- In coordination with relevant NMFS and NOAA offices, ensure effective communication with the NGO community
- In conjunction with relevant NMFS and NOAA offices, ensure dialogue with NGOs to identify opportunities to include NOP and regional program messages in their materials
- In conjunction with relevant NMFS and NOAA offices, distribute relevant national and regional outreach materials to NGOs
- Following Regional policies, fulfill NGO data requests in a timely manner

Contact: Partnerships and Communications Division (Office of Sustainable Fisheries)

3.1.8 Observers

Fisheries observers are highly trained biological technicians. The NMFS does not employ observers directly, but contracts with private sector companies to provide observer coverage. The primary responsibilities of the companies/institutions are to recruit and hire observers and arrange logistics for trips. Observer programs typically utilize two different types of outreach materials:

1. Materials from the observer program developed to communicate with the observers themselves (e.g. newsletters, training manuals, videos)
2. Materials developed by the observer program that aid in observers' communications with the industry (e.g. translation cards)

The majority of communication with observers occurs at the regional level. The role of the NOP should be to support these communication activities and facilitate the exchange of successful outreach strategies or materials across regions. When activities occur at the national level, (such as the development or modification of national regulations and policies, high-level reports, etc.) the NOP should take the lead in coordinating outreach efforts to the observer community. These outreach materials should incorporate the following observer-related methods and strategies as appropriate:

Primary Messages

- Observers play a critical role in the communications process between observer programs, NMFS, and the fishing industry and

- Observer data is central to obtaining important scientific data that helps ensure the health and vitality of marine ecosystems

Best Practice Strategies

- Distribute observer recruitment/public relations videos
- Develop translation cards for basic communication on vessels in which English is not the first language of the crew
- Recognize the contribution of observers when possible
- Regularly contribute updates and articles to observer newsletters, such as the Association of Professional Observer's Mail Buoy

Contact: Regional Observer Program Managers

3.2 Future Audiences

Raising the awareness of the importance of observer programs with the general public is also a goal of the NOP. The NOP recognizes that effective communication with the public cultivates stewardship of marine resources and a commitment to their conservation and management. However, due to budget constraints, large scale expansion of observer program outreach efforts to the general public is a longer term goal of the NOP. Exceptions will be made as appropriate, e.g. participation in NOAA-wide public events as requested. In the future, the outreach plan may expand to include new audiences. This will be taken into account during the updating process.

4. Proposed Activities and Timeline

The previous section describes target audiences and identifies “best practice strategies”, which outline how general principals and tactics should be used in national outreach efforts. This section provides a plan for implementing the NOP Outreach Strategy.

4.1 Funding

During each funding cycle, regional staff with observer programs should ensure inclusion of outreach components in proposed observer projects (brochures, fact-sheets, presentations, etc.) as needed. In some cases, funding will be required for outreach projects that will benefit multiple regions or that are led by the NOP (i.e. the Annual Report). The NOP communications coordinator will work to identify project costs on an annual basis. The communications coordinator will also work to identify additional funding opportunities (such as internal grants) that could be used to benefit observer program outreach.

4.2 Annual Outreach Activities

Each year, the NOP will identify specific activities to support the goals outlined in section 2.2.4. In 2007, these actions address the need to: 1) implement the outreach strategy and 2) begin national level outreach out to target audiences during the initial implementation phase (“year one”). In future years, outreach goals will be revisited and outreach efforts from the previous year will be documented and evaluated.

Appendix A: Contacts

A.1 Regional Observer Program Managers

North Pacific Groundfish Observer Program, Seattle, WA

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