

Northeast Fisheries Science Center
Fisheries Sampling Branch Observer Programs
OBSERVER TRAINING CERTIFICATIONS

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The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) Fisheries Sampling Branch (FSB) collects, maintains, and distributes data for scientific and management purposes in the Northwest Atlantic. FSB manages three separate but related observer programs: the Northeast Fishery Observer Program (NEFOP), the At-Sea Monitoring Program (ASM) and the Industry Funded Scallop Program (IFS). Here, “observer” refers to any observer/monitor working for FSB.

Observed commercial fishing trips are required under many of the region's fishery management plans, and for some fisheries by federal laws and authorities such as the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, and the Sustainable Fisheries Act.

The intent of this document is to provide an overview of the certification process and how certifications are maintained for individual FSB observer programs.

I. Training Certification Process for All FSB Observer Programs

Training

Applicants are evaluated and approved by the FSB staff prior to the start of each training class. Applicants should be in contact with their observer service provider prior to training for expectations, prerequisites¹, and logistical information needed for training. A list of approved programs and service providers can be found at <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/femad/fsb/program.html>. All FSB observer programs require

¹ For observer qualifications, see the National Observer Program (<http://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/observer-home/index#>) and IFS observer qualifications (<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/fsb/scallop/>).

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observers to be certified in first aid and CPR (see the FSB Training and Program Standards document <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/femad/fsb/training/>). During training, observer candidates are educated in many disciplines including, but not limited to, safety procedures and protocols, conflict resolution training, fish/sea bird/protected species identification, biological sampling, fishing operations/gear, data collection and data submission requirements.

Upon successful completion of the training course, including any training trips occurring during training, and other associated requirements (*e.g.*, meeting and maintaining the FSB Training and Program Standards, achieving a minimum passing score, successfully passing the background security check), the candidate will be approved to begin the certification training trip process.

Certification

Upon completion of the training, each observer candidate is required to complete a series of certification training trips before final certification is awarded. The number of training trips required will be dependent upon the training program and certification type. These trips should be single day trips and preferably not in special access areas or special management programs, which may require more detailed and time sensitive reporting. In order to be considered a certification training trip, the trip must have observed catch, the required number of hauls should be observed (see the NEFSC Observer Biological Sampling Manual) and all required observer gear must be onboard the vessel. Observer candidates must also submit species verification photos or frozen fish samples from a certification trip.

A trip trainer may be required for at least one of the certification training trips. Trip trainers are experienced observers certified by FSB to accompany observer candidates (see the NEFSC FSB Trip Trainer Certification Standards). The purpose of the trip trainer is to evaluate how well the candidate performs in the field, and how well they can complete the observer tasks without assistance.

All trips must have the required electronic portion, including digital photos, uploaded within 48 hours of landing. Hard copies must be received by FSB within five calendar days (NEFOP and ASM) or four business days (IFS) of landing. Trips should be identified as training trips either by program code (if applicable) or by writing “Training Trip” on the Vessel and Trip Information Log.

Approval

All certification training trips are edited as a priority and debriefed immediately, typically on the day the trip is received by FSB staff. The observer candidate cannot redeploy until the Data Editor Lead has sent out an email to the observer candidate and service provider approving them for their next trip. Once all certification training trips are successfully completed, the Data Editor Lead will review the data and, if approved, the observer candidate will become an FSB certified observer. Once certified, the observer can

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redeploy without further approval on the approved gear type(s). See sections below for individual requirements for each training type.

The first certification training trip must be taken within 2 months of the completion of the training course. No more than 2 months can elapse between certification training trips, unless there are extenuating circumstances, which must be communicated to and approved by the program COTR in advance. No more than 6 months can elapse between training and program certification². If these timelines are not met, the candidate will not become certified and will not continue with the program. An additional certification training trip may be required if data quality is not acceptable by FSB standards. If the additional trip is not acceptable by FSB, the candidate will not become certified.

II. Northeast Fisheries Observer Program (NEFOP) Certification Process

Training

The NEFOP observer certification process begins with an intensive training course lasting approximately three weeks conducted at the Observer Training Center. The gear types that are taught and considered core NEFOP gear types are:

1. Gillnet
2. Bottom Trawl

Certification

A minimum of four certification training trips must be completed in order to achieve final certification. The first trip must be a with a certified trip trainer. Remaining certification training trips will be solo trips on either gillnet or bottom otter trawl vessels. At least one certification training trip must document the ability to take species verification photos and biological samples, such as otoliths and/or scales. No more than one limited gillnet trip will count towards certification. After NEFOP certification, the observer will be approved to observe a multiday trip. The Data Editor Lead must approve the first multiday trip before the observer can deploy on additional multiday trips. Once approval for this occurs, the observer will only need approval for trips on a new gear type.

IIa. Additional NEFOP Certifications

Additional NEFOP gear/fishery certifications are available and include hook and line, high volume fisheries, pot and trap, clam dredge, southern shrimp trawl, NEFOP scallop dredge, and NEFOP scallop trawl. These gear types are taught in modules by the FSB staff and range in length from one day to approximately one week.

² For initial NEFOP and IFS certifications, if the observer does not cover a gear type during their certification training trips, they have up to 1 year from their training date to successfully observe on the other gear type(s), otherwise they will have to attend a refresher for the additional gear type(s).

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Qualifications

In order to be considered for additional NEFOP gear modules an observer must:

1. Be a certified NEFOP observer (completed Gillnet and Trawl training);
2. Complete a minimum of five trips (not to include training trips during training courses or certification training trips);
3. Complete a minimum of twenty sea days as a certified NEFOP or ASM observer;
4. Be in good standing with FSB (*e.g.*, not on priority or probation, no recurrent data or protocol issues/problems); and
5. Maintain the FSB Training and Program Standards

Training & Certification

A minimum of one certification training trip must be completed in order to achieve final certification. After the certification trip is approved by FSB, the observer will be allowed to continue taking trips on that gear type. If necessary, an additional certification training trip may be required.

III. At-Sea Monitoring Program (ASM) Certification Process

Training

The ASM observer certification process begins with an intensive training course lasting approximately two weeks conducted at the Observer Training Center. The gear types taught and considered core ASM gear types are:

1. Gillnet
2. Bottom Trawl
3. Longline
4. Handline

Certification

A minimum of four certification training trips must be completed in order to achieve final certification. There is no requirement for a trip trainer, and certification training trips may be single day or multiday. At least one certification training trip must document the ability to take species verification photos. The first three certification training trips will be evaluated and approved by the Data Editor Lead based on electronic uploads; the fourth evaluation will include a review of paper data from all certification trips. After ASM certification, the observer will be approved to observe a multiday trip. The Data Editor Lead must approve the first multiday trip before the observer can deploy on additional multiday trips. Once approval occurs, the observer will only need approval for trips on a new gear type.

IV. Industry Funded Scallop Program (IFS) Certification Process:

Training

The IFS observer certification process begins with an intensive training course lasting approximately two weeks conducted at the Observer Training Center. The gear types taught and considered core IFS gear types are:

1. Scallop Dredge
2. Scallop Trawl

Certification

A minimum of three certification training trips must be completed in order to achieve final certification. There is no requirement for a trip trainer, and certification training trips may be single day or multiday. At least one certification training trip must document the ability to take species verification photos and biological samples, such as otoliths and/or scales. After IFS certification, the observer will only need approval for trips on new gear types.

IVa. Additional IFS Certification (Scallop Trawl)

An additional IFS scallop trawl certification is available. This gear type is taught in a module by FSB staff and lasts one day.

Qualifications

In order to become certified in IFS scallop trawl, an observer must:

1. Be a certified IFS observer;
2. Have completed a minimum of twenty sea days as a certified IFS observer;
3. Be in good standing with FSB (*e.g.*, not on priority or probation, no recurrent data or protocol issues/problems); and
4. Maintain the FSB Training and Program Standards

Training & Certification

A minimum of one certification training trip must be completed in order to achieve final certification. After the certification trip is approved by FSB, the observer will be allowed to continue taking trips on that gear type. If necessary, an additional certification training trip may be required.

V. FSB Observer Cross Training

Training

Observers can be cross trained in multiple programs and hold dual certifications. These trainings are taught by FSB staff and are variable in length and scope. Cross trainings focus on the same core gear types as standard core trainings, but are reduced in length to reflect the observers' prior experience.

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Qualifications

In order to be considered for an FSB observer cross training, an observer must:

1. Be a certified NEFOP, IFS, or ASM observer;
2. Complete a minimum of five trips (not to include training trips during training courses or certification training trips);
3. Complete a minimum of twenty sea days as a certified observer;
4. Be in good standing with FSB (*e.g.*, not on priority or probation, no recurrent data or protocol issues/problems); and
5. Maintain the FSB Training and Program Standards

Va. NEFOP Observer Certifying as an ASM Observer

Certification

A minimum of two ASM certification training trips must be completed in order to achieve final certification. The first certification training trip will be evaluated and approved by the Data Editor Lead based on electronic uploads; the second evaluation will include a review of paper data from both certification trips. A certified trip trainer may be requested by the COTR, the service provider, or the candidate themselves. Certification training trips may be single day or multiday. After ASM certification, the observer only needs approval for trips on a new gear type.

Vb. All Other Cross Trainings

Certification

Training trip requirements follow those for initial trainings in the new program.

VI. Maintaining FSB Program Certifications

In order to maintain certification as an observer in all FSB programs, the person must:

1. Maintain the FSB Training and Program Standards;
2. Not have any physical/health job performance limiting factors; and
3. Observe on at least one trip within a 12-month period per program

NEFOP and IFS Certifications and Gear Approval

Should an observer be certified on a gear type, but not actively observe 12 months from the observer's certification date on that gear, the observer must attend an approved refresher course and successfully complete all requirements (*e.g.*, maintain the FSB Training and Program Standards).

ASM Certification and Gear Type Approval

All certified ASM observers are required to attend a yearly recertification training based on the anniversary of their certification. Should an observer be certified on a gear type, but not actively observe 12 months from the observer's certification date on that gear,

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then the observer will be required to wait to be debriefed and approved by the Data Editor Lead prior to deploying on that gear type again.

A COTR can approve an observer to have a two month grace period to obtain their recertification, if lapsed past their year anniversary. The observer cannot work as an ASM observer during this grace period. The service provider must notify FSB staff prior to the lapse of an observer's certification. In the event that the observer is unable to attend recertification training during this two month grace period, the observer will be required to re-attend a core ASM training. A formal request for the observer to re-attend a core ASM training must be submitted to the FSB staff with the reason(s) why the observer was unable to attend the offered recertification trainings. This request must be approved by FSB staff. Recertification is dependent upon successfully completing training and data quality requirements. Refer to the FSB Training and Program Standards for specific details.

VII. Safety Certification

During the core NEFOP, ASM, and IFS trainings observers are required to meet the FSB Physical Standards and successfully complete a two-day safety training course ("Safety I"). This includes hands-on practical stations, a pool session, and a safety exam.

In order to maintain their safety certification, observers are required to complete a two-day safety refresher training course ("Safety II") every 18 months which may include pool and/or open water sessions.

For more details refer to the [FSB Training and Program Standards](#).