



NOAA FISHERIES

Office of Science and Technology's National Observer Program

Observers At-a-Glance

Role of observers: Monitor commercial fisheries and collect data to support science, conservation, and management. Support compliance with fishing and safety regulations.

Number of observers: 902*

Total annual days at sea: 73,843*

Types of assignments: Commercial fishing and processing vessels, processing plants, motherships.

Professional training and qualifications:

Observers must have a bachelor's degree in natural sciences (including the equivalent of at least 30 semester hours in biological sciences), at least one undergraduate course in math or statistics, and experience with computer data entry. Most at-sea observer and monitoring programs require an intensive 2-3 week course that includes training in biology and species identification, data collection, fishing and safety regulations, and at-sea survival skills. Observers participate in regular safety briefings to keep their knowledge current.

Skills required: Specific skills vary by job, but include species identification; biological specimen data collection; proper protected species handling; ability to tread water and/or swim in an immersion suit and to right and board a life raft; ability to manage motion- and seasickness; ability to work long and irregular hours; and aptitude for maintaining diplomacy, professionalism, and interpersonal relations in a challenging environment.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/observer-home/

*Based on 2016 data.

**At-sea monitors collect data to estimate discards for vessels in the Northeast groundfish fishery.

Observer Safety Program Review

Promoting Sustainable Fisheries

For more than four decades, NOAA Fisheries has used fishery observers and at-sea monitors** to collect data from U.S. commercial fishing and processing vessels, as well as from shore-side processing plants and “motherships” (also known as receiving vessels). Our eyes and ears on the water, observers and at-sea monitors are professionally trained biological scientists gathering first-hand data to support a wide range of science, conservation, and management activities.

Strengthening Safety Programs

Ensuring observer safety and a professional working environment is a top concern for NOAA Fisheries. The cornerstone of our approach has been active partnerships among NOAA Fisheries, NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement, the contractors who hire observers, the fishing industry, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the observers themselves.

Over the past four decades, NOAA has developed and implemented world-class safety and training programs. But even with the best protocols in place, accidents can occur, and on occasion tensions between observers and their shipmates can arise.

As part of our ongoing commitment to improving and strengthening our safety programs, in 2016 NOAA Fisheries launched a comprehensive review of all aspects of fishery observer and at-sea monitor safety and health. Led by a team of outside auditors, the review focuses on seven key areas:

- Safety reporting.
- Communications.
- Practices and policies.
- Training.
- Regulations.
- Equipment.
- International issues.

The safety review will gather and assess information from our stakeholders and partners, recommend improvements, and develop continuing self-evaluation tools for the regional observer programs. The final report is expected in late 2017. NOAA Fisheries will then work with our national and regional observer programs, as well as observer provider companies, to implement recommendations from the report, ensuring all observers have what they need to stay safe and healthy on board.

SAFETY REVIEW UNDERWAY

Overview: A comprehensive review by outside auditors of all aspects of fishery observer and at-sea monitor safety and health is now underway to ensure ongoing observer safety and professional working environments.

Methodology: Auditors gather and assess information from stakeholders and partners on regional and national observer program practices, including training, curricula, policies, oversight, planning, and equipment.

Key milestones:

- Review team orientation meeting, NOAA Fisheries headquarters (Sept. 2016).
- Regional Observer Program site visits:
 - North Pacific Observer Program: Seattle (Dec. 2016); Alaska (May 2017).
 - Southeast Fisheries Observer Program: Galveston (Dec. 2016); Miami (Jan. 2017); St. Petersburg and Panama City, FL (Mar. 2017).
 - Northeast Fisheries Observer Program: Woods Hole, MA (Dec. 2016 and Apr. 2017).
 - Pacific Islands Regional Observer Program: Honolulu (Feb. 2017); American Samoa (Mar. 2017).
 - West Coast Observer Program: Newport, OR (Apr./May 2017).

Review deliverables:

- Presentation of report to NOAA Fisheries leadership with recommendations and best practices (late 2017).
- Development of continuing self-evaluation tools for the regional observer programs to ensure safety.

Learn more:

www.fisheries.noaa.gov/stories/2016/10/observer-safety-review.html