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The Marine Recreational Information Program, or MRIP, is the way NOAA Fisheries is counting and reporting marine recreational catch and effort. It is a customer-driven initiative that not only produces better estimates, but does so through a process grounded in the principles of transparency, accountability and engagement.

For More Information:

Leah Sharpe
(301) 427-8205
leah.sharpe@noaa.gov

MRIP mail-based Fishing Effort Survey Questions and Answers

MRIP is transitioning from a household telephone survey to a mail survey design for surveying saltwater recreational anglers about their shore and private boat fishing trips on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. A process for transitioning to this new survey method was developed by NOAA Fisheries and its partners to ensure improved recreational catch estimates are incorporated efficiently and effectively into stock assessments and management processes.

Overview

Since November 2014, MRIP has been working with partners and stakeholders to ensure awareness of NOAA Fisheries' plan to move from the Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS) to the new mail-based Fishing Effort Survey (FES) for estimating recreational fishing effort for shore and private boats on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. We hosted stakeholder webinars on the survey method itself and the transition plan for implementing it. A complete list of FAQs will be coming soon to our website, www.countmyfish.noaa.gov. Below is a sample of some of these questions.

Q: *Why is MRIP making changes to the way recreational fishing effort is estimated?*

A: On the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, NOAA has traditionally estimated shore and private boat fishing effort through the Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS). The CHTS uses a method called random digit dialing (RDD) to target households in coastal counties with landline telephones. RDD has been widely accepted as an effective survey method for many years, and focusing on the coastline has been a good way to find saltwater anglers. However, there are several well-known potential problems with this approach that could result in biased or skewed estimates.

- *Non-coverage*: With more people abandoning landlines for cell phones, which are not included in landline RDD telephone surveys, a growing number of potential anglers are now unreachable. Currently, only 60 percent of U.S. households have a landline phone, down from nearly 100 percent as recently as 1998.
- *Nonresponse*: Response rates, or the percentage of households who pick up the phone and answer survey questions, are declining for many U.S. telephone surveys. This is true whether surveying fishing effort, public opinion, or attitudes about a commercial product or service.

- *Measurement*: Our research indicates that many telephone survey respondents cannot accurately recall past fishing trips.
- In addition, the CHTS is inefficient for collecting fishing information as many calls go to households with no anglers.

Testing of the mail-based Fishing Effort Survey (FES) suggests that the mail survey design produces more accurate estimates than the CHTS. The new method achieves much higher response rates than the CHTS, minimizing the risk of nonresponse bias, and the FES sample comes from all valid postal addresses within coastal states, essentially eliminating the risk for non-coverage bias. In addition, the mail survey provides respondents with more time than the CHTS to think about survey questions and provide an accurate response.

Q: *When conducting the mail survey, what percentage of mailings goes to the USPS database addresses vs. the Angler Registry database addresses?*

A: The distribution of mailings between licensed and unlicensed households varies by state and sampling period (two-month "wave"). Overall, we use a sample from a comprehensive USPS database of addresses and compare that to the list of addresses from the license and registry database, and match the addresses found. This matching divides the samples into two sampling groups - addresses with licensed anglers and addresses without licensed anglers. Being able to identify these groups allows us to target sampling towards households with licensed anglers. Therefore, we sample the licensed anglers at a higher rate, in all states and two-month waves. We do this because we know those people are more likely to fish which ensures that estimates are based upon data provided by a large, representative sample of anglers. The goal of the sampling design and sample distribution is to maximize the precision of effort estimates for each state and wave.

Q: *Does the survey account for anglers fishing on for-hire vessels?*

A: No. The new mail survey only asks about fishing trips made from shore and/or on a private or rental boat.

Effort data for charter boats in the Atlantic and Gulf fisheries, and for head boats in the Greater Atlantic Region, are derived from a separate weekly telephone survey of for-hire vessel operators, the For-Hire Survey. Both catch and effort data for head boats in the Southeast Region are derived from the Southeast Head Boat Survey, a trip-reporting program operated by NOAA's Southeast Fisheries Science Center. You can learn more about our for-hire surveys and improvements we're making to them at www.countmyfish.noaa.gov.

Q: *When will the Fishing Effort Survey be considered "best scientific information available?"*

A. Catch estimates based on the Fishing Effort Survey will not be considered best available science until 1) historical catch estimates have been adjusted to account for the fishing effort estimates that would have been obtained if the FES had been used in place of the CHTS in prior years and 2) these adjusted effort and catch statistics have been incorporated into stock assessments and the setting of new Annual Catch Limits (ACLs).

It is very important that we measure, understand, and explain differences between the CHTS and FES and how those differences may have changed over time, so that we can develop appropriate models to appropriately correct historical catch statistics. CHTS estimates do not reflect the actual amount of fishing effort that has occurred in the past due to sources of survey error that have been addressed in the FES design. Once historical estimates have been corrected, they can be incorporated into stock assessments and new ACLs can be established. At that point, estimates based on the new survey design will become the "best available" for monitoring catch relative to an ACL, and the CHTS will no longer need to be continued. While we understand that the CHTS design has its limitations, its continued use for management purposes during the transition is necessary for maintaining a consistent time series. This does not affect the sustainability of our stocks, as effort data are only one piece of information used to determine how well a stock is doing. Once we can compare the CHTS and FES estimates in the same 'currency,' we will better be able to manage all of our fisheries.

Research studies will continue in parallel with this transition process to better understand and explain differences between the current estimates produced by the new FES and the CHTS.

Q: *When will all of the MRIP survey changes stop?*

A. We are constantly evaluating the methods NOAA Fisheries uses to ensure they are providing the most accurate estimates of recreational catch and effort. MRIP will include an ongoing research program to ensure that data collection designs remain consistent with best practices and advancements in survey science and technology. We are sensitive to the disruption that new methods create, and we are working to carefully transition from historical to improved, more accurate methods.

Q: *Has MRIP really made any progress?*

A. We've addressed many of the concerns identified in the 2006 National Research Council's (NRC) independent review of NOAA's recreational fisheries surveys. We've collaborated with state partners to create a National Saltwater Angler Registry, which is an integral component of an improved recreational fishing effort survey, developed a more accurate method for estimating catch rate from historical onsite survey data, and implemented a more accurate catch survey design. We will continue to make improvements

to our catch and effort surveys to ensure we're meeting the needs of our stakeholders and managing the Nation's fishery resources sustainably.

MRIP has also requested a new NRC review of the program and its progress. We anticipate that the review will start in 2016.

Learn more

To learn more about the mail-based Fishing Effort Survey (FES) Transition Plan and other improvements MRIP is making, visit our website at **www.countmyfish.noaa.gov**.

In the Next Newscast:

Our next Newscast will announce the successful proposals for FY16 MRIP project funding.

Ask MRIP

Do you have questions about MRIP or our surveys? Ask us and we'll answer your question in an upcoming newsletter. If you've got a question about MRIP that you'd like answered, please e-mail Leah Sharpe at Leah.Sharpe@noaa.gov.