



# 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 qualifications and training:** 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

Jane DiCosimo

[jane.dicosimo@noaa.gov](mailto:jane.dicosimo@noaa.gov)

(301) 427-8109

[www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/observer-home/](http://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.

# NOAA's National Observer Program

## On the Front Lines of Sustainable Fisheries

For more than four decades, NOAA Fisheries has used fishery observers to collect catch and bycatch 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 on what's caught and thrown back by U.S. commercial fishing vessels. The high-quality data they collect are used to monitor federal fisheries, assess fish populations, set fishing quotas, and inform the management of those fisheries. Observers also support compliance with fishing and safety regulations. Today, there are fisheries observer programs in all five NOAA Fisheries management regions: Alaska, West Coast, Pacific Islands, Greater Atlantic, and Southeast.



Observers are highly trained professionals working on the front lines of sustainable fisheries science and management.

Observers and at-sea monitors undergo rigorous scientific and statistical training to identify and take samples of the ocean life that might come aboard. Getting it right is important because the stakes are high.

## A Day in the Life

Observers may spend days, weeks, or even months aboard commercial fishing and receiving vessels. The work is intense, and conditions may be uncomfortable. Long trips, close quarters, and the observers' role in monitoring compliance can sometimes lead to tensions onboard. Preparing observers for safe deployments requires an active partnership among NOAA Fisheries (including NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement and Office of General Counsel), observers, observer providers, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the fishing industry.

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## Ensuring Safety and Professionalism

Observers play a critical role in the sustainable management of our nation's fisheries. For observers to be effective, the working conditions must be safe and professional. Since the inception of the observer program in the 1970s, NOAA Fisheries has continually worked to develop and institute world-class training and safety protocols. These include intensive 2-3 week sessions that cover properly identifying different species, collecting data and biological specimens, fishing and safety regulations, and donning an immersion suit in a minute or less.

## Observer Safety Program Review

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 is focusing on seven key areas: safety reporting, communications, practices and policies, training, regulations, equipment, and international issues. The auditors will gather and assess information from 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.



Observers must participate in extensive safety training.