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:
  - Southeast Fisheries Observer Program: Galveston (Dec. 2016); Miami (Jan. 2017); St. Petersburg and Panama City, FL (Mar. 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: