



NOAA FISHERIES

National Observer Program

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

Skills and education required: Observers typically 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. 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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*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 shoreside 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 technicians gathering first-hand data on what's caught and discarded by U.S. commercial fishing vessels.

Observers and at-sea monitors undergo rigorous scientific and statistical training to identify and take samples of the ocean life that might come aboard. 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: Greater Atlantic, Southeast, West Coast, Alaska, and Pacific Islands.

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. 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.

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 two- to three-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. Observers also participate in regular safety briefings to keep their knowledge current.

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 safety experts, the review focused on seven key areas: safety reporting, communications, practices and policies, training, regulations, equipment, and international issues. The Observer Safety Program Review (OSPR) report was released in May 2018 and included 118 recommendations. Since the release of the OSPR, NOAA Fisheries and the National Observer Program have implemented over 50 percent of the 118 recommendations. These include beginning a process to revise requirements regarding observer provider insurance, and implementing a standard approach for incident reporting and comprehensive after-action reporting for more serious incidents.

BY THE NUMBERS

Total number of observers:

850

Total annual days at sea:

71,607

Source: NOAA Fisheries, 2019

