

## **NEFSC Fisheries Sampling Branch Fishery Observer Redeployment Plan**

August 2020

In response to the COVID-19 health emergency, fishery observing and monitoring requirements for federal fisheries in the Northeast were temporarily suspended from March 20 through August 13, 2020.

During the waiver period, the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's Fisheries Sampling Branch (FSB) worked on internal protocols and processes to ensure shoreside components of the program can operate. They also coordinated with observer providers to develop redeployment plans.

Observers and at-sea monitors are an essential component of commercial fishing operations and provide critical information that is necessary to keep fisheries open and to provide sustainable seafood to our nation. On July 30, NOAA Fisheries announced that our fishery monitoring waiver would expire August 13.

This plan is a working document, and is revised as necessary to respond to events.

Here we present a summary of the major operational changes implemented in the program to support redeployment beginning August 14, 2020.

### **For Observers**

- COVID-19 awareness/responsiveness training
  - Proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE).
  - Strategies to minimize risk of virus transmission in port and at sea.
  - Required reporting of suspected or confirmed COVID-19 illness.
- Recertification changes
  - Self-assessment of readiness to return to observing.
  - Observer specific redeployment debriefing based on each self-assessment.
- New personal safety equipment
  - "Starter kit" of basic PPE (hand sanitizer, disposable gloves, face coverings, non-contact digital thermometers). Backorder items (soap, wet wipes) supplied as available.
  - Replaced by observer providers as needed.
- Best practices
  - Employee specifics in each provider redeployment plan.
  - CDC recommendations for NOAA employee interactions with observers and industry.
- Revised sampling requirements to maintain physical distancing. Examples include:
  - GPS recording from a tablet or InReach.
  - Captain's signature not required on the data request forms.

## For Observer Providers

- Redeployment plans specific to their company operations.
- FSB worked with providers to facilitate consistency between provider plans and the FSB plan. While plans vary to account for each provider's business practices they each address the following:
  - COVID-19 prevention protocol compliance between deployments.
  - Symptom monitoring between deployments.
  - PPE supplies.
  - Observer pre-trip health screening and potential vessel screening.
  - Travel limitations to reduce physical contact prior to and during deployments.
  - Temperature checks while at sea.
  - Responding to and reporting on COVID-19 symptoms at sea.
  - Post-trip health screening.

Providers are also considering testing as available and necessary, and most are offering additional training on COVID-19 awareness, preventions, and PPE use. Copies of these plans are available from the providers upon request.

- NOAA Fisheries is temporarily easing restrictions on the number of times an observer/at-sea monitor can cover the same vessel(s) to help reduce new interactions.

## For Fishermen

- Pre-sailing vessel health check. Provider companies may ask questions of the captain and crew prior to sailing concerning the following. The exact questions can be found in the provider redeployment plans.
  - COVID-19 prevention protocol compliance between trips by captain and crew.
  - Current status of COVID-19 symptoms among the captain and crew.
  - Current status of COVID-19 among captain and crew - positive tests or exposure to a person who has tested positive.  
Onboard procedures to reduce exposure to COVID-19.
  - Response plan should someone develop symptoms of COVID-19 during a trip.
  - Onboard supply of personal protection and sanitizing equipment for captain and crew.
- Electronic monitoring (EM)
  - Vessels without EM will have priority for observer placement in the initial phase of the redeployment.
  - Dockside monitoring program will go on, adjusted to meet COVID-19 guidelines.
  - Industry-Funded Monitoring for the herring fishery has been delayed.

## For NOAA Fisheries operations:

- Prioritize coverage to match observer capacity:

- SBRM catch monitoring starting with minimum pilot coverage.
- Industry-Funded Scallop coverage.
- Marine Mammal Protection Act coverage.
- At-Sea Monitor coverage (non-EM vessels).
- Industry-Funded Monitoring for the Atlantic herring fishery.
- Vessel selection
  - Adjust notification systems to facilitate deploying the same observer to the same vessel/pool of vessels as possible.
- Compliance monitoring
  - The Office of Law Enforcement and FSB worked together to streamline incident and compliance reporting.