

OBSERVER PROGRAM

Situation: At the April meeting, the Council proposed development of an on-board observer program that would require all limited entry and open access vessels to take an observer when so directed. The Council indicated the sport charter boat fleet may also be included in the program. In order to have an observer program ready for implementation in 2000, the Council established an ad-hoc implementation committee to develop a program design and regulatory package for adoption in November 1999. President Clinton's budget request to Congress for fiscal year 2000 includes \$2 million for a West Coast observer program and the Council expressed its intent to have a program ready for implementation if the funding becomes available.

While details of the program will be developed by the committee, the Council described the type of program it would like to see and how it would be administered. The immediate need is to estimate total groundfish bycatch (discard) by the fleet in order to better estimate total fishing mortality to various groundfish stocks. This information is important both to future stock assessments and rebuilding plans for overfished stocks. The Council wants to build on existing infrastructure to the extent possible and use the experience gained in other programs, such as the Alaska observer program and the Oregon Enhanced Data Collection Program. The West Coast program may be administered either by NMFS and/or the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, and observer deployment on vessels may be based on program design, availability, seaworthiness, time, and space for an observer and sampling procedures. Flexibility will be built into the program so that coverage and design can be changed depending on the availability of government funds and based on the advice of the Council, its advisory committees, and the public. Agreement to carry an observer may be a condition of fishing and renewal of the limited entry permit. For open access vessels, agreement to carry an observer may be a condition for landing any groundfish and, if an open access permit is established in the future, agreement to carry an observer may be a condition for the permit. The program most likely will be designed to distribute observer coverage among fishing sectors based on pounds landed. However, the implementation committee may consider alternative program designs for distribution of observer coverage.

The first meeting of the implementation committee occurred on June 7, and the committee will present a progress report to the Council in this meeting. The committee intends to present a final report in September for Council consideration as a proposed regulatory amendment. The committee will outline a comprehensive data collection program, focusing primarily on the observer component to verify other components of the program and fill in any gaps. Final Council action would be scheduled for November 1999.

Council Action: Provide guidance to committee.

Reference Materials:

1. Ad-Hoc Observer Program Implementation Committee Report (Supplemental Attachment G.7.a.).
2. Public comments (Public Comment G.7.).

PFMC
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