



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 Science and Sustainable Fisheries

For more than five 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 vital 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- to 4-week sessions that cover species identification, data collection, biological sampling, fishing and safety regulation instruction, and marine safety training. Observers also participate in regular safety briefings to keep their knowledge current.

Building Transferrable Skills

Although some observers make a long-term career out of observing, the list of leaders in natural resources science and management who have started off as observers is long and impressive. Many have translated their professional experience into fulfilling jobs with natural resource agencies and beyond. Some have been hired as debriefers or safety trainers by observer programs, or moved to NOAA Fisheries Regional Offices and Science Centers doing work unrelated to observer programs. Others have gone on to different state or federal natural resources agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, consulting companies that focus on issues such as offshore wind power, and nonprofit organizations with a variety of missions including ensuring the viability and future of regional fisheries. Analytical skills learned as an observer can also support applications to competitive graduate school programs.



BY THE NUMBERS**

Total number of observers:
779

Total annual days at sea:
60,350

Source: NOAA Fisheries, 2021

**Numbers were impacted by COVID-19 interruptions.
 Photo: NOAA Fisheries' West Coast Region Observer Program