



NOAA
FISHERIES

Office of Science
and Technology
Silver Spring, MD

Observers and Observer Data: A Critical Part of Sustainable Fisheries Management

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**New Council Member Training
October 30, 2024**



Session Objectives

- Describe national and regional observer programs, including main responsibilities for programs and observers
- Explain how observer data support sustainable fisheries management
- Provide an overview of observer coverage rates nationwide
- Share current challenges, and how Councils can help



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U.S. Observer Programs

Alaska

Seattle, WA

- North Pacific

- Alaska Marine Mammal

(operates in years of funding)

West Coast Northwest

Seattle, WA

- West Coast Groundfish

- At-Sea Hake

West Coast Southwest

Long Beach, CA

- Deep-Set Pelagic Longline

- Deep-Set Buoy Gear

- California Large-Mesh Drift Gillnet

American Samoa

Pacific Islands

Hawaii-Based Pelagic Longline • Honolulu, HI

American Samoa Pelagic Longline • Pago Pago, AS

Greater Atlantic

Woods Hole, MA

- Northeast Fisheries

- At-Sea Monitoring

- Industry Funded Scallop

- Industry Funded Herring

National

Observer Program

Silver Spring, MD

Southeast

- ▲ Southeast Shrimp Trawl • Galveston, TX

- ▲ Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish • Galveston, TX

- Southeast Coastal Gillnet • Panama City, FL

- Shark Bottom Longline • Panama City, FL

- Atlantic Pelagic Longline • Miami, FL



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National Observer Program (Inception 1999)

Responsibilities

- Advocate monitoring priorities, including budget management, at the national level
- Develop policies and procedures supporting NOAA Fisheries observers and regional observer programs
- Enhance data quality and achieve consistency in key areas of national importance



The National Observer Program Advisory Team (NOPAT)

Sets policy and budgetary direction for the NOP. Members include representatives from NOAA Fisheries HQ Offices, Regions, and Science Centers, as well as a U.S. Coast Guard liaison.

NOAA Fisheries Headquarters

Office of Science and Technology

Office of Sustainable Fisheries

Office of Protected Resources

Office of Law Enforcement

Regional Offices

Alaska

Greater Atlantic

Pacific Islands

Southeast

West Coast

Science Centers

Alaska

Northeast

Northwest

Pacific Islands

Southeast

Southwest

General Counsel for Fisheries

General Counsel for Enforcement and Litigation

Workplace Violence Prevention and Response Program

U.S. Coast Guard (liaison)

Fisheries Observers

- Typically have a bachelor's degree in natural sciences
- Require the ability to work long and irregular hours and an aptitude for maintaining professionalism and interpersonal relations in a challenging environment
- Undergo rigorous scientific, statistical, and safety training
- Gather first-hand data on what's caught and discarded by U.S. commercial fishing vessels
- Support compliance with fishing and safety regulations



Regional Observer Programs Responsibilities

- Develop sampling protocols and coverage levels
- Train observers
- Create deployment plans
- Debrief observers
- Manage and analyze data
- Ensure observer safety



2022: Deployed 933 observers / 63,036 sea days / 54 fisheries covered

Observer Responsibilities: Fishing Effort Data

For every observed haul/set collect:

- Date and time of fishing activity
- Latitude and longitude of gear
- Depth of catch
- Gear type and mesh measurements
- Vessel characteristics
 - Type, permit number, length
- Vessel catch estimates

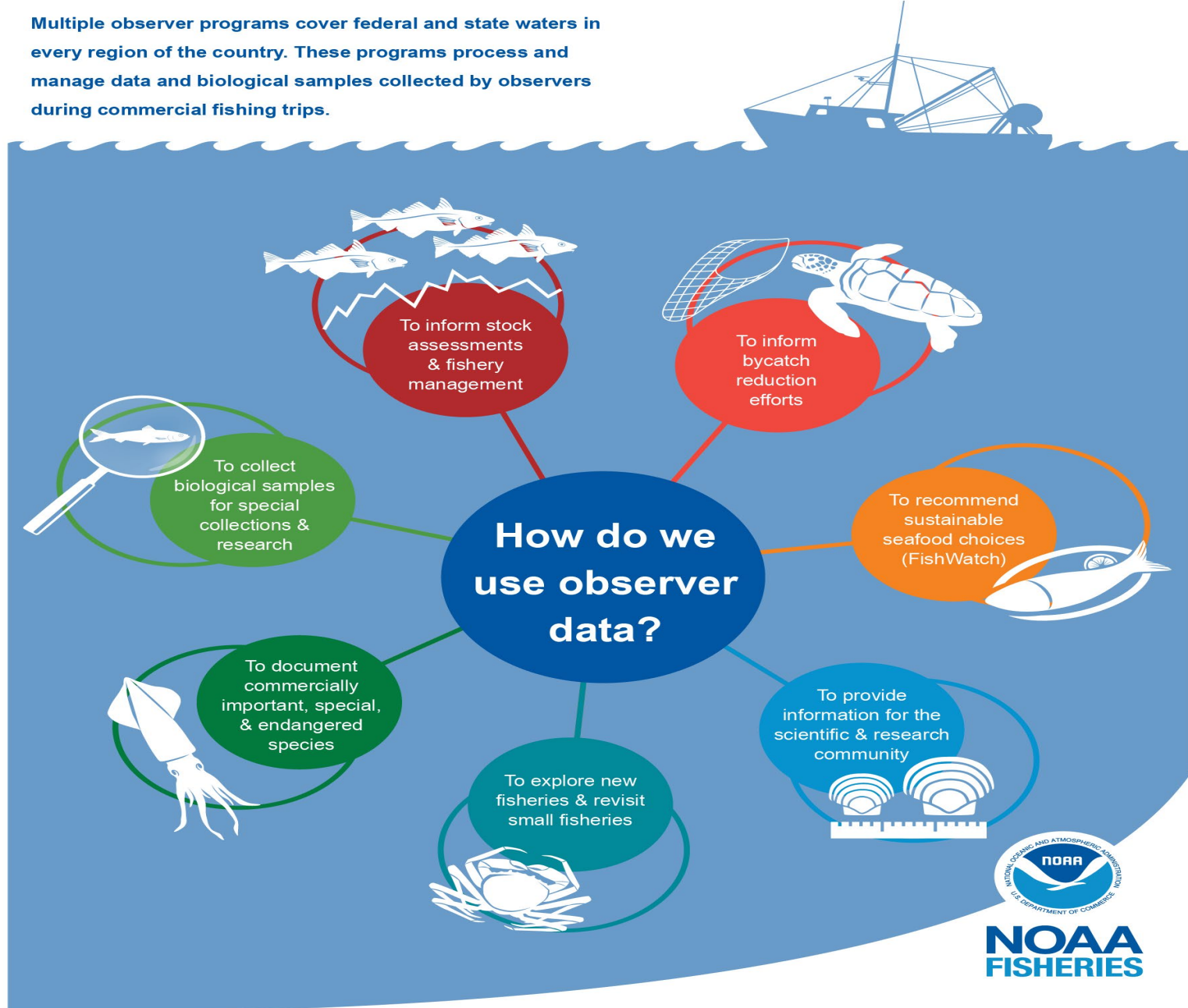


Observer Responsibilities: Catch and Discard Data

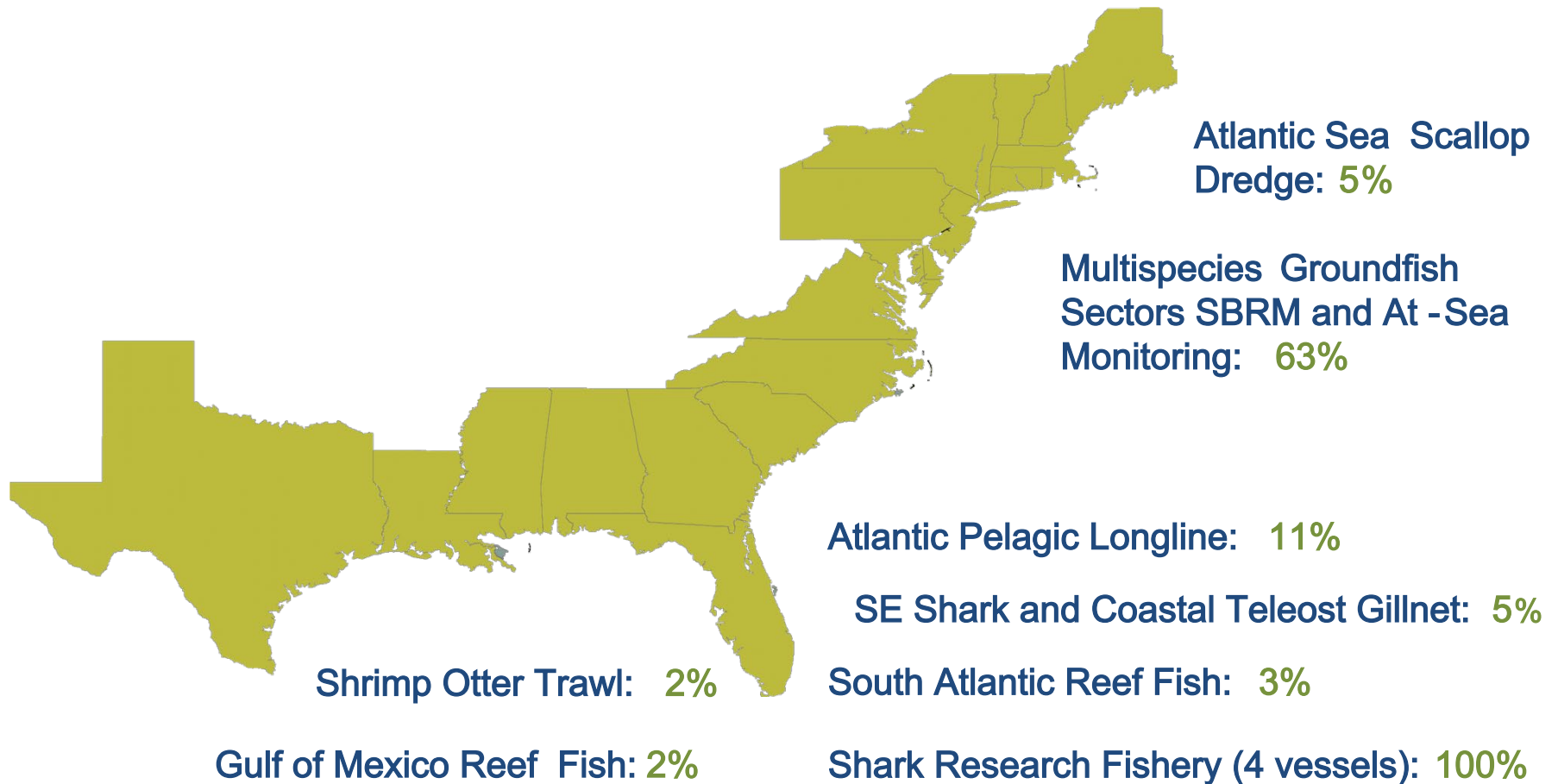
- Fish species composition fish from individual hauls
- Total catch estimates
- Biological samples
- Discarded catch data
 - Non-target species
 - Prohibited species
 - Incidentally caught marine mammals or endangered seabirds



Multiple observer programs cover federal and state waters in every region of the country. These programs process and manage data and biological samples collected by observers during commercial fishing trips.



Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico 2022 Coverage



North Pacific (Alaska) 2022 Coverage

Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands and
Gulf of Alaska Groundfish Full Coverage:
100%

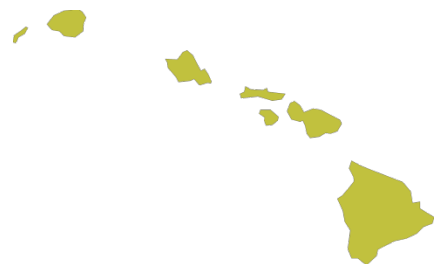


Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands and
Gulf of Alaska Groundfish and Pacific
Partial Coverage: 15-36% for at -sea
observers and shoreside samplers, 30 -
100% for Exempted Fishing Permit
vessels

Pacific Ocean and Western Pacific 2022 Coverage

West Coast Trawl Catch Shares:
100%

West Coast Groundfish
Non-Catch Share Fisheries: 41% for
Limited-Entry Permits, 1 - 10% for Open -
Access Permits



Hawaii/American Samoa
Pelagic Longline:

Hawaii deep-set tuna—20%
Hawaii shallow-set swordfish—100%
American Samoa—9%

CA Deep-Set Tuna
Pelagic Longline: 24%

Deep-Set Buoy Gear Exempted
Fishing Permit: 36%

CA Large-Mesh Drift Gillnet : 19%



Current Challenges

- Preventing observer harassment
 - NOAA Fisheries has a zero tolerance policy for observer harassment
 - The safety and well being of fisheries observers deployed in federal fisheries, as well as the integrity of the data they collect and provide to the agency, are a top priority
- Recruiting and retaining observers
- Increasing costs for observer programs along with increased agency data needs
- Balancing electronic technologies with at-sea observer capabilities
- Possibly less flexibility in funding new programs due to Supreme Court ruling

How Councils Can Help

- Reinforcing to industry the importance of fishery-dependent data collection
- Continuing to invite regional observer program managers, and observers and monitors themselves, to your meetings as appropriate
- Promoting safe working conditions on fishing vessels for fishermen and observers, including zero tolerance for any harassment including sexual assault and sexual harassment.

Questions?

