

National Observer Program Update

B-2

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FY 2016 budget

The FY16 budget to support observer programs is expected to be level -funded. Congress has provided an additional \$7,000,000 for Electronic Monitoring and Electronic Reporting (EM/ER) to support the development, testing, and installation of electronic technologies across the country. Not less than \$3,000,000 will be made available for collaborative partnerships that include non-Federal matching funds to implement cost-shared EM/ER programs that support fisheries conservation and management across the country; the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Request for Proposals is expected to be announced in early spring. Congressional language associated with these funds directed that during the development and implementation of EM and ER programs, NMFS shall consult directly with industry and work through the Fishery Management Councils to develop appropriate cost-sharing arrangements that are commensurate with the ex-vessel value of the fishery. Congress also stated that with respect to the ongoing evaluation of EM/ER technology on small fixed-gear boats, NMFS is directed to prioritize activities in FY 2016 that utilize currently available technologies that contribute in the near term to improved fisheries management, including but not limited to, catch or discard data.

Electronic Technologies Funds for EM/ER projects to be conducted by NMFS in FY 2016 for all regions total \$2,650,000. Approximately \$445,000 of the newly appropriated FY 2016 EM/ER funds, along with ~\$300,000 of NMFS funds from the Office of Science and Technology and the Office of Sustainable Fisheries, will fund the projects listed below for Alaska. Alaska EM and ER projects in FY 2016 total more than \$750,000.

Regional Funding for Electronic Monitoring and Reporting Projects (from All Sources)		
Project Name	FMC	Total Funded
Development and Deployment of a Web-based Electronic Reporting Software Tool for Fishery-Dependent Data	AFSC	\$175,000
Real-time reporting of effort and haul location in the Alaskan fixed gear fleet.	AFSC	\$79,790
Implementation of electronic monitoring in the North Pacific	AFSC/ PSMFC	\$445,224
Electronic Reporting Hand-Held Device Integrated with eLandings - Feasibility Study with Proof of Concept Field Trial	Alaska DF&G	\$53,000
TOTAL FOR ALASKA		\$753,014

Observer provider insurance

NMFS provided guidance in its May 28, 2015 letter to the Council that NMFS agreed with recommendations by Alaskan Observers, Inc., in its letter dated March 25, 2014 to the Council, that some observer provider insurance requirements at 50 CFR §679.52(b)(1)(vi) are excessive or inapplicable and should be revised. The referenced requirements are the Jones Act, General Maritime Law, and the US Longshore and Harbor Workers Compensation Act. Development of a national approach to develop minimum threshold(s) for observer provider insurance requirements, as needed, is proceeding by National Observer Program staff, in consultation with General Counsel and Office of Sustainable Fisheries at headquarters, the regions, and the centers.

Bycatch

Numerous bycatch-related activities are occurring in February 2016, including online publication of the U.S. National Bycatch Report (NBR) First Edition Update 2. Update 2 should be published by the end of February 2016. It documents improvements in bycatch monitoring and reduction in each region of the country. For Alaska, the report includes new estimates of marine mammal interactions in Southeast Alaska drift gillnet state fisheries for 2012 and 2013. In addition, the restructured North Pacific Groundfish and Halibut Observer Program produced bycatch estimates for the Alaska longline halibut fishery, including its first seabird interaction estimates.

The National Bycatch Report Steering Committee is aware of the North Pacific Council's concerns, as expressed in its letter of July 8, 2015, and will respond to those concerns in the future. For example, the lack of recreational fishery bycatch estimates is being addressed through an Action Plan for Fish Release Mortality Science (also due to be published in February 2016), which will support improved estimation of release and discard mortality rates in recreational and commercial fisheries. Although Update 2 does not include bycatch estimates for recreational fisheries, the Committee will explore ways to include bycatch estimates for recreational fisheries with established release mortality rates in the NBR Second Edition (due to be published in late 2017/early 2018).

The Council has expressed concern over the NBR's inclusion of marine mammal and seabird estimates. Although marine mammals and seabirds are not part of the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) definition of bycatch, they do fall under the definition of bycatch that was established in the 2004 NOAA Technical Memorandum "Evaluating Bycatch." Update 2 will include language in its introduction to discuss why marine mammals and seabirds are included in the report, even though they are not part of the MSA bycatch definition.

The Council also expressed concern over the perception that the NBR may provide misleading information about certain Alaska fisheries. The NBR Steering Committee has tried, and will continue to try, to resolve these issues. For example, the cod jig fisheries identified by the Council were excluded from Update 2 due to lack of observer data. The Council also has suggested that the NBR should identify what proportion of reported bycatch is economic versus regulatory discards. The Committee will discuss possible ways to make this distinction in the U.S. NBR Second Edition, when the Committee meets later in 2016. The Committee appreciates the Council's helpful suggestions and looks forward to working with the Council to increase NBR's usefulness and accuracy over time.

Sea Grant Fellow

Dr. Yuntao Wang started with the National Observer Program on Monday, February 1, 2016. Dr. Wang will support the NBR Steering Committee as it develops the U.S. NBR Second Edition. Dr. Wang also will assist with some of the objectives of the Action Plan for Fish Release Mortality Science. Those objectives include investigating the feasibility of creating an acoustic tagging-related device loaner program and develop an online clearing house for release mortality estimation research and priorities.

Dr. Wang also will examine the issue of observer retention across regional observer programs. Survey results will be used to understand the characteristics of observers who stay in observer programs or go on to other scientific careers, as well as the types of incentives that might increase observer retention and lower training costs. Results should be available by the end of 2016.

2nd National Electronic Monitoring Workshop

A steering committee is developing a national EM workshop for EM practitioners to discuss technical, procedural, and other issues to foster communication, share information, and learn about the successes and challenges associated with EM systems. The workshop is planned for the West Coast (likely Seattle) during summer 2016 (likely July) for ~100 participants. Day 1 would include 1) Introduction, workshop purpose and logistics and 2) regional EM updates by fishery/sector and lessons learned (what is working; what challenges remain). Day 2 would cover 1) Cross Regional /Program Issues (e.g., data storage, data confidentiality, etc.), 2) Use of EM data (e.g., catch accounting, enforcement, etc.), and 3) Other (e.g., industry buy-in, cost-sharing, etc.).

International Fishery Observer and Monitoring Conference

The 8th International Fisheries Observer and Monitoring Conference is tentatively scheduled for August 22–25, 2016 in San Diego, California. Special sessions on EM, Safety and Training, International Observer Programs, and other topics are planned. Additional information about the upcoming conference will be posted soon at <http://www.ifomc.com/>. The 7th IFOMC Proceedings was recently made available on the website.