

Salmon Bycatch in the Bering Sea Pollock Fishery: Focus on the Observer Program

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During the past several months, many Yukon River fishers have asked questions and raised concerns about the policies and procedures of the observer program in the Bering Sea pollock fishery. The observer program is responsible for collecting data on catch and bycatch of the pollock fishery. Martin Loefflad, Director of the Observer Program for Alaska Fisheries Science Center of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), was kind enough to answer some of the questions we've heard most frequently.

YRDFA: How much of the pollock fleet is currently observed?

Martin: The Bering Sea pollock fishery is one of the most heavily observed fleets in the nation. Currently, catcher processors and motherships must have two observers at all times (equivalent to 200 percent coverage), and one of these observers must be a lead level 2 observer. A lead level 2 observer has proven his or her ability to collect quality data via previous experience on similar vessel types and/or fisheries. Catcher vessels longer than 125 feet in length must have one observer at all times. Catcher vessels between 60 and 125 feet in length must have an observer for 30 percent of their fishing days. I am not aware of any catcher vessels that are less than 60 feet.

YRDFA: What does 100 percent observer coverage mean for the various sectors of the pollock fishery? Is every haul monitored? What about 200% coverage?

Martin: The phrase 100 percent coverage in the NMFS Alaska regulations means that a vessel must carry an observer during 100 percent of its fishing days. In turn, 200 percent coverage means that a vessel must have two observers during 100 percent of its fishing days. Two observers allow for round-the-clock monitoring.

YRDFA: What changes to the observer program will take place in response to Amendment 91—the recent action taken by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council regarding Chinook salmon bycatch?

Martin: The key change to the observer program will be that the observer will be required to accurately count Chinook salmon for Prohibited Species Catch allocations. To meet this objective, the following requirements will be implemented under this proposed rule: (1) there will be 100 percent observer coverage for all vessels and processing plants participating in the Bering Sea pollock fishery; (2) all salmon will be retained; and (3) there will be specific areas to store and count all salmon.

From a program standpoint, we are planning to have vessels retain all salmon, and every Chinook and chum salmon will be counted by the observer. Then, the observer will collect a systematic random sample of these fish for genetic studies to assess, to the best of NMFS' abilities, where the fish came from.

Other measures are proposed in the rule that will help ensure that the fish are not discarded prior to an observer counting them.

YRDFA: What safeguards are in place to ensure that observers see and count all salmon that are caught as bycatch (that is, that they can't be dumped overboard)? What happens when the observer is sleeping, in the bathroom, etc.—are salmon caught at those times counted?

Martin: The regulations require that all prohibited species, including salmon, be retained until counted by an observer. Having two observers on a catcher processor or mothership helps ensure that this happens. One observer on a catcher vessel is sufficient to ensure fish do not disappear because the observer can see every haul and everything goes into large refrigerated seawater tanks. Also, the observer monitors the offload when it occurs at the dock to ensure every salmon is sorted from the catch. It is a lot of work, but we have dedicated people working hard to complete this task routinely. Safeguards include excellent support from our office of Law Enforcement that conducts investigations if there is a violation of the regulations. In addition, several other steps are proposed in the rule noted to help ensure fish cannot be hidden from the observer's view. We will not know the exact details until the public comments on the proposed rule and the NMFS publishes a final rule. However, a great deal of effort has gone into making a sound system to account for salmon bycatch by using our extensive observer program to independently monitor and count salmon bycatch.

YRDFA: Is there potential for the pollock fishers to distract an observer and dump bycatch overboard before it is counted?

Martin: There is always the potential for this to happen, and NMFS has had experiences with personnel from other fisheries attempting this type of activity in the past on halibut bycatch issues. NMFS has prosecuted these cases. At this time, I am not aware of any overt attempts to bias observers' samples in the pollock fishery, and we will work diligently to ensure it does not happen in the future. Our interest, and our work, is all about ensuring we have good information to manage our fisheries resources.

YRDFA: If some hauls go unobserved, does NMFS have an estimate of what portion of those hauls are missed?

Martin: Because we have a very high level of coverage for the pollock fishery in the Bering Sea, it is expected that the observer samples every haul. If the observer cannot sample a haul due to illness or injury, it is clearly documented such that there is a record for every haul that occurs (sampled or not sampled) while the observer is on board the vessel.