

Northeast Fisheries Observer Program (NEFOP)

The Northeast Fisheries Science Center's Fisheries Sampling Branch manages the Northeast Fisheries Observer Program (NEFOP). They monitor the NEFOP observer provider company, provide training and certification, perform data quality assessments, process pre-trip notification, and manage vessel selection across notification fisheries. NEFOP observers have played a vital role in the management of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic fisheries since the program's inception in 1989.

Roles and Responsibilities

NEFOP observers collect catch, gear, fishing effort, and biological data over a range of commercial fisheries from Maine to North Carolina. Examples include the groundfish, herring, squid, surf clam & ocean quahog, and lobster fisheries. Observer coverage requirements were established under the Magnuson-Stevens Act and the Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology (SBRM) Omnibus Amendment, the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act.

Data collected by observers are used to identify key characteristics of commercial fisheries in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions. Catch data and biological information informs stock assessments. Protected species samples provide life history information and data for bycatch estimation.

Duties of a NEFOP Observer

NEFOP observers are deployed on vessels participating in Category I, II, and III fisheries in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. For a complete list of categories visit: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/interactions/>. Fishing trips typically range from one to fourteen days. Data are collected electronically on hand held tablets and paper logs. NEFOP sampling protocols require observers to collect weights for kept and discarded species caught, measure lengths and take biological samples of priority species. Interactions with marine mammals, sea turtles, and birds are documented and detailed. Information on vessel operating costs, detailed gear configuration, and fishing locations are also collected.

Minimum Qualifications

Education – 1) bachelor's degree, 2) at least one class in math or statistics and a minimum of 30 biological credit hours, and 3) experience with computers.

Physical – must be able to work for extended periods of time at sea, sharing common facilities in close quarters. Observers must be able to lift and/or drag heavy objects, climb ladders, tolerate stress, work long hours, and live in confined spaces.

Citizenship – must be a U.S. citizen, or a non-citizen who has a green card, TN authorization, H1 visa, or valid work visa, and a social security card.

Requirements – must hold a current certification for CPR and First Aid. They must successfully pass a NEFOP observer certification course administered by the FSB and receive a medical clearance from their doctor stating they are fit for sea duty.

Conflict of Interest – must not have any direct or indirect interest in a fishery managed under federal regulations, including, but not limited to, vessels, dealers, shipping companies, sectors, sector managers, or advocacy groups.

How will I be notified to carry an observer?

Fishermen and fishing industry representatives will be notified in advance, whenever possible, that observer coverage will be required. Alternatively, dock intercepts may also be used on the day of departure. Fishermen may be notified that they have been selected for observer coverage either by selection letter, phone, or in person by NMFS personnel, NEFOP observers, or NEFOP observer provider staff.

What are my responsibilities when carrying an observer?

- Provide the observer with living quarters, meals, and amenities comparable to a crew member
- Allow the observer access to areas of the vessel and gear necessary to conduct sampling and collect required data
- Allow the observer access to communication equipment and view of navigation equipment as necessary to perform their duties
- Allow the observer to sample, retain & store marine mammal, other protected species and/or target and non-target species specimens
- Provide true vessel locations by latitude and longitude upon request by the observer
- Provide the observer with VTR serial numbers and VMS fishing activity codes if requested
- Notify the observer when commercial fishing operations are to begin and end
- Allow for the safe embarking & disembarking of the observer

What are the vessel safety requirements I must meet to carry an observer?

Observers are required to review emergency instructions with the vessel operator and complete a pre-trip safety check of the vessel's emergency equipment prior to departing on a trip (observers arrive early to conduct the pre-trip safety checklist). Observers will verify that the equipment, registrations and certificates meet the requirements.

- All vessels MUST have a current U.S. Coast Guard Commercial Fishing Vessel Safety Examination decal, an observer may not depart on a trip selected for coverage until the decal is up to date
- Personal flotation devices/immersion suits for all crew onboard (observers provide their own suit & PFD)
- Ring buoys or other approved flotation
- Distress signals/flares
- Fire extinguishing equipment
- EPIRB registered to vessel with current NOAA SARSAT registration, battery, and hydrostatic release
- Survival craft with sufficient capacity to accommodate the total number of crew onboard including the observer