



3. FishWatch

FishWatch provides up-to-date information and facts about U.S. seafood, so consumers and businesses can make informed decisions and be pointed toward sustainable choices. Observer data help assess the state of the fishery, determine impacts to habitats, and evaluate bycatch for FishWatch.

4. Scientific/Research Community

Every year FSB receives requests for non-confidential fisheries data for use in research from government agencies, the commercial fishing industry, and academic



institutions across the country. From 2015-2019 the program processed over 300 of these data requests.

5. Explore New or Smaller Fisheries

The fishing industry constantly evolves as new technology is developed and new markets open. Observers are there to collect baseline data for managers to determine if the resource could be—or still is—fished sustainably.



6. Document Species

In 2018, our fisheries observers spent about 10,782 days (~172,200 hours) at sea, where they encountered many types of fish, mammals, seabirds, and invertebrates. The FSB's Species Verification Program (SVP) validates the accuracy of identification by requiring observers to photograph or submit a wide variety of commercially important species, endangered species, or species of particular concern. SVP data provides feedback to observers and are used to improve FSB observer training methods, support improved data accuracy, and evaluate species-specific data reliability. SVP records provide high-confidence data on species

distributions used to identify important and shifting species-specific habitats and ranges.

7. Special Collections

Due to their specialized training and equipment, observers offer a unique opportunity to support new research or fill data gaps by collecting biological samples. Observers help promote long-term sustainability of fishing ecosystems by working collaboratively with fishermen, scientists, and resource managers.



NORTHEAST FISHERIES SAMPLING BRANCH



National Marine Fisheries Service
Northeast Fisheries Science Center



Fisheries Sampling Branch (FSB)

The Northeast Fisheries Science Center's FSB manages multiple observer programs covering federal and state waters from Maine to North Carolina. FSB staff process and manage data and biological samples collected by observers during commercial fishing trips.



Professionally trained fisheries observers gather high-quality data on species caught during U.S. commercial fishing trips.

Other data collected include information about fishing methods and location, gear characteristics, kept and discarded fish weights, and information about protected species interactions.



Samples or specimens are collected from protected species providing life-history data and information on where, when, and how many of these animals are unintentionally caught during fishing operations. Ultimately, all observer data support NOAA Fisheries' mission of stewardship of the nation's ocean resources and their habitat by monitoring fisheries, assessing populations, informing regulations, and much more.

Our Observer Programs

Northeast Fisheries Observer Program (NEFOP)

NEFOP observers collect catch, gear, fishing effort, and biological data over a range of commercial fisheries. These data enable the basis for bycatch (non-target species) estimates of all federally managed species in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions, including protected species. All federally permitted vessels are required to carry an observer when selected. In addition, vessels operating in state-water fisheries may have to carry an observer if they are determined to have a high likelihood of interaction with marine mammals.

At-Sea Monitoring (ASM)

ASM coverage is an integral part of groundfish quota monitoring. The information on catch composition from commercial groundfish vessels is primarily used to estimate total discards by sector, gear type, and stock area, but are also used to support science-based management and ensure regulatory compliance. The ASM requirements are detailed under Amendment 16 of the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan.

Industry-Funded Scallop (IFS)

IFS observers monitor catch from dredge and trawl gear aboard commercial sea scallop vessels as specified by the Atlantic Sea Scallop Fishery Management Plan. Data collected by IFS observers are used to identify key characteristics of the commercial Atlantic sea scallop fishery in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions. IFS

observer data inform stock assessments, monitor commercial gear selectivity, aid in spatial management, and help support a sustainable scallop fishery.

Approved Observer Provider Companies

These companies help NOAA Fisheries with its mission to ensure sustainable fisheries and recovery of protected species. NOAA Fisheries contracts directly with observer provider companies for the federally funded NEFOP and approves observer provider companies for industry-funded programs. These companies recruit, hire, and deploy observers and provide support services, such as insurance, salary, and travel support for observers.



How Observer Data are Used

Observers provide unique and independent information collected at sea critical to the effective management of marine resources. The data are used to support sustainable fisheries and recover protected species.

1. Support Stock Assessments and Fishery Management

Observer data directly inform stock assessments which are used to monitor the health of fisheries. Fisheries managers utilize observer data to set catch levels, maintain healthy fish populations, and rebuild overfished stocks.



2. Reduce Bycatch

Commercial fishery catch includes two components: kept catch and discarded catch. Kept catch is landed and sold while discarded catch is thrown back into the ocean. Because some of the discards do not survive, NOAA Fisheries is working with fishermen and others to modify commercial fishing gear to reduce unwanted bycatch. When a gear modification is made, data collection is essential to make sure the modified gear is working as intended.