

EXCERPT: Observer Advisory Committee – Meeting Report

September 19 - 20, 2017, 9am – 5pm

Observer Training Room, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, Seattle, WA

Tendering data concerns and solutions

Diana Evans presented a short scoping paper identifying the observer data concerns that have been raised in the past with respect to vessels delivering to tenders, and the potential solutions that have been discussed to date to address them. OAC members had reached out to constituents, particularly in the western GOA, to inform their discussion of how well each of the solutions addresses the problem, and which are favored by industry members. The OAC agrees that it is important to consider these two different data concerns separately, and identify solutions that meet the separate objectives rather than trying to mix them together.

Chinook salmon sampling in the GOA pollock fisheries

The OAC recommends that the ideal solution for Chinook salmon sampling in the GOA pollock fishery is Option 1, to monitor all offloads at the plant, and require EM on trawl vessels to ensure there are no discards. It was noted that observers are often already stationed at Western GOA plants because of deliveries of Bering Sea pollock - in Sand Point especially, and less so in King Cove but still some. The OAC recognizes this is a long-term process, but it represents the best solution. The industry would prefer to have the accurate salmon counts that come from censusing the offload, rather than relying on basket samples onboard vessels delivering to tenders, and tenders are an important business practice to allow vessels to fish up to their trip limit and maintain throughput in the plant.

The OAC did discuss in general terms how to go about developing an EM compliance program for the western GOA. While a very different type of EM program would be needed for bottom trawl, for the pollock fishery, where EM would be coupled with full retention, the fishery can piggyback on other EM studies. The Bering Sea pollock CVs have submitted a NFWF proposal to look at maximized retention with EM compliance monitoring in the Bering Sea pollock fishery, in lieu of carrying an observer, and will submit an EFP to the agency early in 2018. Once the parameters are worked out in the Bering Sea, the GOA pollock vessels should be able to coopt or adapt those requirements. There was some discussion about whether it would be useful to set up and kick off a workgroup in order to at least ensure that the workplan for an EFP or other study would be useful in the GOA. The OAC returned to the discussion of prioritizing the next EM projects under the Observer Analytical Projects agenda item, below.

The OAC also noted that a version of Option 4, to develop an alternative sampling program, has effectively been proposed for 2018 in the ADP, by redefining the objective for dockside monitoring to exclude deliveries to tenders. Option 2, which would require tenders to keep fish from observed and unobserved vessels separated, is not practical for the plants because it would result in too much unused capacity. Option 3, to sample the offload onboard the tender, could perhaps be workable from the industry perspective, but could be prescriptive for vessels if they were forced to deliver to the tender that has an observer. The agency also remains concerned that it would not be cost efficient for the partial coverage program, assuming that the observer is permanently stationed on the tender and accruing costs on a daily basis.

Observer bias

With respect to solutions that address representative data from observed versus unobserved vessels delivering to tenders, **the OAC recommends the Council initiate a regulatory analysis of Options 2a and 2b, to change the definition of a tender trip so that either every delivery starts a new trip, or a tender trip may constitute no more than a maximum number of deliveries. The OAC recommends that the analysis should evaluate allowing observers to deploy from tender vessels,** and that a secondary objective of the action is to provide relief to vessels that otherwise have to have an observer onboard a small vessel for long periods while the vessel is making use of a tender. This is effectively a refinement of the tabled observer tender analysis that received preliminary evaluation in 2015 and 2016.

Tom Evich, OAC member representing the western GOA, gave a briefing on where tender activity takes place in the western GOA. He noted that the practicality of returning to town to pick up an observer depends on the season and fishery, and suggested that during the winter cod fishery in the western GOA, it is impossible to go back to town for an observer, whereas in the pollock fishery it is impractical but not impossible. He also highlighted the difference on a small trawl vessel between the feasibility of having an observer onboard for a trip (24 to 48 hours) versus having the observer onboard for the tendering season, which can last up to 5 weeks. Many, although not all, OAC members disagree with previous US Coast Guard and NMFS concerns about inherent safety issues in having observers transfer vessels at the point of a tender delivery, and want to see those issues reexamined.

The OAC acknowledges that Option 1, to create separate tender strata by gear type, is already in place in 2017, although it has not yet been evaluated for its efficacy. The OAC also noted that Option 3b is already tasked, although NMFS was not able to complete the ODDS programming this year that would require the next trip to be automatically observed if an observed trip is cancelled. Again, it remains to be seen once the programming change is implemented, how it will affect data bias.