

Observer Program Restructuring Will Simplify Reporting

Thursday, 12 April 2012

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Fishing

vessel owners have just over eight months to get familiar with the new rules of the observer program. NOAA Fisheries has used the program since 1972 to collect data for use in bycatch reduction, stock assessment, protecting certain species, gear research and regulations compliance. Martin Loefflad is the director of the Fisheries Monitoring and Analysis Division for NOAA. Under the current program vessels are required to have an observer on board 30 percent of the days that they fish. Loefflad says a major problem is that it's hard to predict how many days a crew might be out at sea and so they get a lot of data at the beginning of a quarter and then some at the end when captains realize that they need a few more days of observation to be in compliance. He says gaps in the data make it difficult to fully understand what's going on in any particular fishery. The restructured observer program will change that.

"So

the industry now won't have to figure out their own 30 percent coverage requirement and buy observers from a private contractor and try to make sure that they have the right coverage each quarter. That's going to be our problem. They're just going to have to comply with calling in and taking an observer when they're picked. So it simplifies it for the industry."

To

help with the transition, NOAA is developing a web-based application that will allow vessel owners to log in their trips. The application will be presented during the North Pacific Fishery Management Council meeting in Kodiak this June.

"They'll

log a trip and we'll have a random process in the background that will select that trip, select or not select and they will get notified, "this trip is free and clear" "This trip has been selected" and then that notifies our contractor that you have to coordinate with that vessel and get an observer out there."

Loefflad
says the new observer program will eventually affect smaller vessels.

"Just
like we've had in the past. More observation on the bigger boats and we're
going to be expanding now into some of the smaller boats but as I mentioned
we're going to start slowly because we're new to the smaller boats and they're
new to us and we don't know what all the issues will be. So we're going to take
a step into that arena and try to get some coverage out there because we need
to know what their impacts are on the fishery too. We'll proceed fairly
carefully there. We need information but we don't want to impose unnecessary
burdens on people or put people in a bad spot."

Another
major change to the program is how it's paid for. Loefflad says there will no
longer be the distinction between a 61-foot boat that has to pay and a 59-foot
boat that doesn't have to pay. All vessels will pay a flat fee through their
processor based on the size of their landing.

"It's
fair and that's the beauty that the council was able to get this and they
wrested with it themselves back in October 2010, but it became clear to them
that it's fair, it's equitable, it's scaled to what you land. Hard to argue
with and we have to fund it somehow. And this was a very reasonable way to do
it and fairly innovative."

The new observer program
regulations will go into effect on January 1st, 2013

