



## **Introduction to the West Coast Observer Program**

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## Introduction

The West Coast Groundfish Observer Program’s (WCGOP) goal is to collect discard information that can be used to assess the total mortality of a variety of groundfish species. There are a number of components that must be in place to achieve this goal, which are discussed in this chapter.

## WCGOP Management Structure

The WCGOP is a cooperative effort between NOAA Fisheries and Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC).

NOAA Fisheries and PSMFC work together under this cooperative agreement to manage observer resources. Examples of shared responsibilities include program oversight, vessel selection, data quality assurance and program outreach.



### NOAA Fisheries

NOAA Fisheries (also known as National Marine Fisheries Service, NMFS), an agency within

the Department of Commerce, is dedicated to the stewardship of living marine resources through science-based conservation and management, and the promotion of healthy ecosystems (See Figure 2-1).

As a steward, NOAA Fisheries conserves, protects, and manages living marine resources in a way that ensures

their continuation as functioning components of marine ecosystems, affords economic opportunities, and enhances the quality of life for the American public.

To gauge the effect fisheries have on ecosystem NOAA Fisheries deploys observers to monitor protected species (marine mammals, sea turtles, seabirds) and/or fish and invertebrate bycatch.

NOAA Fisheries responsibilities for the WCGOP include designing and implementing the sampling plan (logistical component to ensure random sampling of the fleet), designing and implementing data collection protocols, ensuring data quality, data storage and management, and data analysis and release. NOAA Fisheries staff includes a team supervisor, database manager, data analyst, field coordinators, and debriefers.

<b>Program Manager</b>	Jon McVeigh Seattle, WA	<b>Lead Debriefer</b>	Ryan Shama Hammond, OR
<b>Field Coordinator</b>	John LaFargue Eureka, CA	<b>Debriefers</b>	Tim Peretti Eureka, CA
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## PSMFC

Authorized by Congress in 1947, the PSMFC is one of three interstate commissions dedicated to resolving fishery issues. Representing California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Alaska, PSMFC does not have regulatory or management authority; rather it serves as a forum for discussion and works for coast wide consensus among state and federal authorities. The PSMFC addresses issues that fall outside state or regional management council jurisdiction.

The PSMFC's goal is to promote and support policies and actions directed at the conservation, development and management of fishery resources of mutual concern to member states through a coordinated regional approach to research, monitoring and utilization.

PSMFC's responsibilities for WCGOP include procuring services of unbiased, neutral observers, supplying observer sampling and safety gear, ensuring data quality, coordinating observer activities and training observers. PSMFC staff includes a program manager, data analysts, program assistant, debriefers, and a half-time state coordinator in each state.

<b>Program Manager</b>	Jim Benante Seattle, WA	<b>Debriefers</b>	Kate Guthrie Seattle, WA
<b>Gear Technician</b>	Eric Brasseur Newport, OR		Phillip Bizzell Hammond, OR
<b>Field Coordinator</b>	Scott Leach Newport, OR		Jen Cramer Newport, OR
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	Yong-Woo Lee Seattle, WA		Eli Coplen Morro Bay, CA
			Toby Mitchell Newport, OR
			John Bieraugel Crescent City, CA
			Jason Vestre Morro Bay, CA



## California Department of Fish and Game

A half-time state coordinator acts as a liaison between California Department of Fish and Game and the WCGOP. He is responsible for coordinating with shore-side samplers, providing current information on vessel activities, facilitating meetings between observers and vessel crew, assisting the WCGOP in ensuring designated vessels have obtained a United States Coast Guard (USCG) vessel safety decal and general program support.

**CA Coordinator** Mike Fukushima  
Eureka, CA



### Alaskan Observers, Inc

Alaskan Observers, Inc. (AOI) recruits biologists year-round to work as domestic groundfish observers in Alaska. AOI also recruits biologists to work in Washington, California, and Oregon as west coast groundfish observers. AOI is in the business of helping the government obtain the data necessary to achieve a sound management plan for the protection and benefit of future fisheries resources in the Bering Sea, North Pacific, and on the West Coast.

AOI manages the observers involved with the WCGOP Non-Catch Share program. AOI provides health insurance and additional insurance coverage while observers are at-sea or working shore-side. AOI is responsible for scheduling vacation and leave without pay. They are also responsible for travel arrangements between ports. AOI staff works closely with PSMFC to manage observer resources to achieve the goals of the program.

<b>General Manager</b>	David Edick Seattle, WA
<b>Recruiting Coordinator</b>	Rachel Moore Seattle, WA
<b>Coordinator</b>	Terry Hillman

## Observer Qualifications

With a functional management structure for WCGOP in place, the next component is ensuring observers maintain a professional and unbiased standing with the fishing communities, scientific communities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This professional standard is a necessity as it speaks to the integrity of observer-collected data.

### NOAA Fisheries Approval for Observers

To become a NOAA Fisheries-approved observer for the WCGOP, training must be successfully completed. In order to maintain approval, observers must:

- Demonstration of proficiency during each trip.
- Receive satisfactory performance assessments and evaluations.

In addition to the above, observers must maintain a professional image by adhering to the WCGOP Standards of Conduct, keeping data confidential, and avoiding conflicts of interest. For more information on maintaining WCGOP Observer Status see Chapter 10, “Observer Life.”

### Standards of Conduct

WCGOP observers have an important image to maintain as professional scientists. Observers must avoid behaving in any manner that could adversely affect the public’s confidence in the integrity of the observer program, the data provided, or other observers. Since observers reside in the same small communities as their vessel crews, maintaining a business-like attitude both on and off the

vessel is very important. Expected behavior includes, but is not limited to, the following:

1. Observers must maintain an unbiased and/or neutral approach to fisheries management issues while on the job and avoid declaring a pro-fishing or a pro-environmental stance.
2. Observers must diligently perform their assigned duties.
3. Observers must accurately record their sampling data, write complete reports, and report honestly any suspected violation of regulations relevant to the conservation of marine resources or their environment in a timely fashion.
4. Observers must not disclose collected data, observations made on-board a vessel, or observations made in a processing facility to any person except the owner of the observed permit, an authorized enforcement agent or a WCGOP staff member.
5. Observers must not engage in any illegal actions or any other activities that would reflect negatively on their image as professional scientists, on other observers, or on the WCGOP as a whole. This includes, but is not limited to:
  - Engaging in excessive drinking of alcoholic beverages.
  - Engaging in the use or distribution of illegal drugs.
  - Becoming physically or emotionally involved with vessel personnel.

Any behavior contrary to these standards, or the intent of these standards, is grounds for disqualification.

Falsification of data is grounds for immediate disqualification and may be a basis for prosecution.

## Conflict of Interest

Observers are required to maintain an unbiased role by limiting their financial interest in the fishery. Observers must abide by the following conflict of interest standards:

- Observers may not have a direct financial interest, other than the provision of observer services, in a West Coast fishery. This includes, but is not limited to:
  - Involvement in the catching or processing of products from the fishery either by vessels or shore-side facilities.
  - Involvement in the selling of supplies or services to these vessels or shore-side facilities.
  - Involvement in the purchasing of raw or processed products from these vessels or shore-side facilities.
- Observers may not solicit or accept, directly or indirectly, any gratuity, gift, favor, entertainment, loan, or anything of monetary value from anyone who conducts activities that are regulated by the NOAA Fisheries, or who has interests that may be substantially affected by the performance or non-performance of the observers' official duties. (Note that this standard restricts observers from accepting home-packed fish without purchase.)
- Observers may not serve as an observer on any vessel owned or operated by a person who previously employed the observer.
- Observers may not solicit or accept employment as a crew member or an employee of a vessel or shore-side processor in a West Coast Groundfish fishery while under contract with an observer contractor.

## Confidentiality

Observer data is confidential as per the MSA. This means that data collected by observers can only be shared with:

- WCGOP Staff (all data, including logbook)
- Designated NMFS Enforcement Agents (all data, including logbook). *Prior to sharing data with enforcement agents, contact your coordinator or debriefer as the staff must maintain a record of what data is being released.*
- Permit owners. **Do not share observer logbook with permit owner, captain, and/or crew.**

Permit owners may ask for copies of the data collected aboard their vessel. Before sharing any data, contact a coordinator or debriefer. The program must maintain a record of what is being released and staff can also provide the permit owner the necessary background material to understand the data. Take note that the data can only be released to the **permit owner**. If the captain requests the data and he/she is not the permit owner, clearly state that the Program can only provide copies of the data to the permit owner. The captain will have to receive copies via the permit owner.

## WCGOP Non-Catch Share Sampling Plan

### Vessel Selection

Besides quality observers, the WCGOP Non-Catch Share program also needs a viable sampling plan to achieve its goal. A sampling plan is the framework used to sample the fleet in a non-biased and random fashion. The sampling plan is executed through vessel selection.

A basic understanding of the vessel selection process is necessary for observers, as it explains observer placement on vessels and priorities for Non Catch Share observer coverage

Last year, the WCGOP Non-Catch Share program provided observer coverage for nine fisheries. The methodology used for vessel selection is summarized below.

1. Permit lists are obtained from state (open access) or federal (limited entry) agencies.
2. Permits are placed in port groups based upon previous year's landings. Port groups are one or more ports grouped together based upon fishing operations and proximity. The WCGOP has 13 port groups between Bellingham, WA and San Diego, CA.
3. WCGOP determines the **selection cycle** length for each fishery
4. Permits are given a random number and selected sequentially for a **coverage period**.
5. Selection letters sent from Seattle to permit owner's approximately 45 days prior to coverage period.
6. Coverage period begins. Vessel is required to carry an observer for all trips during period, unless given a waiver by a designated WCGOP official.

### Determining Selection Cycle Length

As the fishery is managed with landing limits by species or species complex, it is only natural to assume that some limits will be reached prior to the attainment of all species/species complex limits. Once a limit is reached on a species, all individuals of that species caught thereafter will be discarded. Therefore, managers have long assumed that the rate of discard increases as the vessel nears

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**Selection Cycle:** The amount of time required to select and cover all vessels in the selection frame.

**Coverage Period:** The amount of time a vessel is required to carry an observer. During the coverage period, all trips a vessel takes must have an

observer or a WCGOP-issued waiver. Coverage periods are usually two months or seven months.

attainment of the limits. To capture a good image of the discard rate over time, observers are placed on vessels for the length of time the limits cover. For instance, species/species complex limits in the pink shrimp trawl fleet are for one-month periods. Therefore, observers cover shrimp trawlers for all trips during a one-month trip limit period. For the sablefish fishery, vessels catch their sablefish quota over a 7-month period. Observers cover these vessels for all trips during the 7-month period when sablefish are landed

### **Non-Catch Share Fishery Coverage Priority List**

As port groups often have multiple selected vessels that are fishing at the same time and only a limited number of observers, the WCGOP Non Catch Share developed the following fishery priority for observer coverage:

- Limited Entry Sablefish Endorsed.
- Limited Entry Non-Sablefish Endorsed.
- Open Access Pink Shrimp (WA, OR and CA).
- Open Access Nearshore Rockfish (OR and CA).
- Open Access Fixed Gear (WA, OR, and CA).
- Open Access California Halibut (CA).

### **Non-Catch Share Observer Placement**

There are two important facets to observer placement: seasonality and geography.

The number of observers deployed by the WCGOP changes throughout the year to coincide with fishing activity. Fishing activity is highest during the summer months and lowest during the winter. This is due to a

variety of reasons, which include weather and vessel participation in other fisheries. The WCGOP, therefore, almost doubles its working observers during the summer months.

As permits are placed in port groups prior to selection, observers are also assigned to a port group. The port group an observer works in will usually include a large port and the surrounding smaller ports. Observers primarily cover vessels that originate out of their assigned home port group but travel to other port groups may be necessary.

### **WCGOP Observers**

The final component to achieving WCGOP's goal is ensuring data quality. Observers are trained to collect data according to WCGOP protocols and data are checked after collection for accuracy. There are three phases to the data quality process:

- Training/Briefing
- Data Collection
- Debriefing

### **Training**

A fifteen-day training course is required of all observers new to WCGOP. The course consists of an overview of sampling procedures, species identification, safety training, conflict resolution training, training in the use of a web-based data-entry application, small boat etiquette, and general support information. Trainees must pass a series of tests and homework assignments to demonstrate their understanding of:

- Observer priorities and duties.
- WCGOP methods of independent catch estimation.
- Proper recording of data.
- WCGOP methods of sampling and recording species composition data for both retained and discarded catch.
- Fish identification and use of dichotomous keys.
- Gender determination and measurement of fish.
- Procedures for collection of age structures.
- The web-based data entry application.
- Applications of volume, weight, density, and extrapolation calculations.
- Safety and survival skills.

In order to receive NOAA Fisheries-approval, trainees must attend and participate in every class, pass a fish exam and final exam, complete all homework assignments, and make any corrections requested. Trainees must pass a safety test and effectively participate in on-land, in-water, and on-board safety drills. Trainees must also demonstrate the use of vessel safety equipment. Additionally, trainees must be able to demonstrate that they have the attitude and ability required to perform a difficult job independently and to act professionally in stressful situations.

After every year of successful data collection as a WCGOP Non Catch Share observer, attendance at an annual four-day briefing is required. At briefings, experienced observers will receive programmatic updates,

refresh safety and survival skills training, review fish identification skills and take a species identification exam.

### Data Collection

After successful completion of training, observers are deployed to their port groups and placed on selected vessels. While deployed, observers have constant access to WCGOP program staff. There are field stations in Seattle, Washington; Newport, Oregon; Hammond, Oregon; Crescent City, California, Eureka, California; and Morro Bay, California. Debriefers contact new observers after their first trip to discuss the vessel and sampling procedures.

If there are any problems, questions, or comments, call an observer coordinator or debriefer. The coordinators/debriefers' main purpose is to provide help and support to observers. Use this resource! A positive observer/coordinator/debriefer relationship during deployment will provide for an easy end-of-period debriefing and a quick resolution to problems encountered.

### Debriefing

Data is debriefed on a bimonthly basis to ensure that all data are collected according to program protocols. Debriefers meet in person with observers for debriefings either in their home port or at the debriefer's office.

The purposes of debriefing are to:

- Clearly describe all data collection methods utilized.
- Receive feedback on sampling methodology.
- Inform WCGOP staff of any problems encountered.

- Make all necessary corrections to data.
- Receive a written performance assessment and evaluation.

See Chapter 10, “Observer Life,” for a detailed explanation of the debriefing process.