



NOAA FISHERIES

Office of Science and Technology's National Observer Program

Observing 101

Role of observers: Monitor commercial fisheries and collect data to support science, conservation, and management. Support compliance with fishing and safety regulations.

Skills required: Specific skills vary by job, but include species identification; biological specimen data collection; proper protected species handling; ability to tread water and/or swim in an immersion suit and to right and board a life raft; ability to manage motion- and seasickness; ability to work long and irregular hours; and aptitude for maintaining diplomacy, professionalism, and interpersonal relations in a challenging environment.

Resources: The multiple tabs on the National Observer Program site—www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/fishery-observers provides links to a range of information for prospective observers, including:

- Contact information for employment opportunities with observer provider companies.
- An Alaska Fisheries Science Center overview on becoming an observer, and videos from the Northeast Fishery Observer Program on life as an observer.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Becoming a NOAA Fisheries At-Sea Observer

On the Front Lines of Sustainable Fisheries

For more than four decades, NOAA Fisheries has used fishery observers to collect catch and bycatch data from U.S. commercial fishing and processing vessels, as well as from shore-side processing plants and “motherships” (also known as receiving vessels). Our eyes and ears on the water, observers and at-sea monitors are professionally trained biological scientists gathering first-hand data on what’s caught and thrown back by U.S. commercial fishing vessels. The high-quality data they collect are used to monitor federal fisheries, assess fish populations, set fishing quotas, and inform management of those fisheries. Observers also support compliance with fishing and safety regulations.

Getting Started as an Observer

NOAA Fisheries contracts with or certifies private observer provider companies to recruit, hire, and deploy observers. Observer candidates should have:

- A bachelor’s degree from an accredited college or university with a major in fisheries, wildlife biology, or a related field of biology or natural resource management; or
- A combination of marine science and fisheries course work with specialized experience; and
- The capacity to perform strenuous physical labor.



Prior to deployment, most observers also complete an intensive 3-week course that includes training in biology and species identification, fishing and safety regulations, and cold water survival skills. Individual programs may have additional requirements such as current CPR and first aid certification; minimum physical condition standards; U.S. citizenship; and/or agreeing to a background check. Observers also attend regular professional development and safety briefings to keep their knowledge current.

Ensuring Safety and Professionalism

Observers play a critical role in the sustainable management of our nation’s fisheries. For observers to be effective, the working conditions must be safe and professional. Since the inception of the observer program in the 1970s, NOAA Fisheries has continually worked to develop and institute world-class trainings and safety protocols. Preparing observers for safe deployments requires an active partnership among NOAA Fisheries (including our Office of Law Enforcement and General Counsel), observers, observer providers, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the fishing industry.