



Northwest Fisheries Science Center Observer Programs

The NWFSC Observer Programs train, certify, and equip scientists to collect data at sea along the entirety of the West Coast. Our staff ensures data collected by observers is of the highest quality, then analyzes and maintains the data.

At-Sea Hake Observer Program

The hake fishery is the largest by volume off the U.S. West Coast. Fishery observers were first deployed in the at-sea sectors to collect data on fishing operations and catch in 1975. Since then, coverage levels have increased, and now, each catcher-processor and mothership carries two observers for every fishing day, allowing sampling every haul. This fishery sector operates off the Washington and Oregon coasts. The high-quality data observers collect are used for in-season management, stock assessments, life history research, and ecosystems studies.

The hake fishery consists of three sectors:

1. Motherships
2. Catcher/Processors
3. Tribal

Currently, the mothership and catcher-processor sectors both operate under cooperative agreements (co-ops), which are part of the West Coast catch shares program.

See [NOAAs Pacific Whiting overview](#) for more information on the species and fishery.

From 1975-2000, the North Pacific Observer Program (NPOP) deployed observers on hake mothership and catcher-processor vessels. The At-Sea Hake Observer Program (A-SHOP), in its current form, began in 2001 when the NWFSC formed the West Coast Groundfish Observer Program.

The fishery opens May 1 and runs through the end of the year. Typically, there is a “spring season” (May and June) and a longer “fall season” (August through November). Depending on the vessel and the season, trip durations range from 2 to 3 weeks.

Because of the program’s North Pacific ties, observers interested in observing for the At-Sea Hake Observer Program first need to gain experience in the North Pacific. One successful NPOP contract must be completed before qualifying for and attending an A-SHOP training.

West Coast Groundfish Observer Program

The West Coast Groundfish Observer Program's primary objective is to collect coast-wide, fishery-dependent information for federal groundfish fisheries off the U.S. Pacific coast. In addition to estimating bycatch and total mortality, our observers record information on fishing operations, catch composition, protected species interactions, and take biological samples. These data are used to assess and monitor total mortality for groundfish stocks in several distinct fisheries and inform sustainable fisheries management.



What are Catch Share Observers and Non-Catch Share Observers?

All West Coast Groundfish Observers receive the same training that covers safety, fish identification, and sampling in the various West Coast fishing sectors.

All WCGOP observers collect the following information:

- Fishing activity, including areas and depths fished, and gear set and retrieval times.
- Catch estimates, including the amount of each species discarded.
- Data on individual fish, such as length, weight, and sex.
- Sightings and bycatch of protected species like marine mammals and seabirds.

There are some differences in an Observer's contract length and expected vessel coverage. In general Non-Catch Share Observers are hired for 9 or 12-month contracts for deployments in the Limited Entry and Open Access fisheries, while Catch Share observers are hired year-round and cover vessels participating in the West Coast Trawl Catch Share Program. For these observers deploying only on Catch Share vessels, our trainers will highlight specific duties and regulations governing the tracking of quotas and the retention of fish, as this is an Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) managed fishery.

Non-Catch Share observers are deployed in the following fisheries/sectors:

- Limited Entry Sablefish Endorsed Fixed Gear
- Limited Entry Non-Sablefish Endorsed Fixed Gear
- Open Access Fixed Gear (Washington, Oregon, California)

Catch Share observers are deployed on:

- All vessels participating in the shorebased Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) program, including hake, non-hake groundfish trawl, and fixed gear vessels (excluding shoreside hake vessels that use electronic monitoring)
- All motherships participating in the at-sea hake fishery
- All mothership catcher-vessels participating in the at-sea hake fishery (except vessels that use electronic monitoring)
- All catcher-processors participating in the at-sea hake fishery



More about the West Coast IFQ Trawl “Catch Share” Program

The U.S. West Coast groundfish trawl fishery is managed under the [Groundfish Trawl Catch Share Program](#). This program divides the fishery's total allowable catch into shares controlled by individual fishermen. These shares, which represent the number of pounds available to catch, can be caught at any time throughout the year.

Vessels participating in the West Coast Groundfish Trawl Catch Share Program are required to carry a National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) certified observer or an Electronic Monitoring (EM) system during all fishing trips and have their offloads monitored by a certified catch monitor. This level of coverage is required to ensure individual accountability for 100% of all IFQ species or species groups caught. We use observer data to report all IFQ discards, including the mandatory discarding of Pacific halibut. Observer discard data, combined with landings data, enables fishermen to track their individual quotas daily and for managers to monitor the fishery's progress throughout the year.

When implementing the catch share program, the Pacific Fishery Management Council included two features: 100% observer coverage and [economic data collection](#). They did this to ensure the program's integrity by ensuring individual vessel accountability, enhancing data quality, and providing annual surveys of economic and conservation benefits.

WCGOP Fisheries Observer Qualifications

Observers are trained to collect data according to standardized protocols, and data is thoroughly checked for accuracy after collection. All new observer trainees must fully participate in a 15-day training provided by the West Coast Groundfish Observer Program (WCGOP) and achieve minimum performance standards. The training provides an in-depth understanding of collecting accurate fishery data and working efficiently under the strenuous conditions of commercial fishing vessels. Identifying fish, invertebrates, birds, and mammals of the West Coast is a significant component of training. Trainees must pass an annual fish test with a minimum score of 80 percent. Additionally, observers are taught conflict resolution, sexual assault/harassment training, and marine safety and survival skills. Trainees must demonstrate knowledge and proper use of safety equipment and perform well during safety drills.

Educational Requirements:

- Bachelor's degree in one of the natural sciences with 30 credit hours in applicable biological sciences.
- Minimum of one college-level math and one statistics course.
- College course using dichotomous (taxonomic) keys.
- Background check and/or Criminal Disclosure Statement.
- Recent physical exam, physically able to lift 50 lbs.
- Computer skills to work competently with standard database software.
- A-SHOP requires all of the above plus the successful completion of at least one deployment with the North Pacific Observer Program (NPOP)

Observer Providers

NOAA Fisheries contracts with or certifies private observer provider companies to recruit, hire, and deploy observers. If you're interested in becoming an observer, start by reaching out to these companies and searching for opportunities on their websites.

- [Alaskan Observers, Inc](#)
- [Saltwater, Inc](#)

Contact

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More Information

- › [West Coast Groundfish Trawl Catch Share Program](#)
- › [Compliance Guides for West Coast Groundfish](#)
- › [Fisheries Observation Science on the West Coast](#)

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