



NOAA FISHERIES

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Anne Richards, NEFSC/NOAA

Northeast Fisheries Observer Program (NEFOP) Observers in the Lobster Fishery

Which vessels are eligible for coverage?

Any vessel that holds a federal American lobster permit and is required to submit Vessel Trip Reports (VTR) is eligible to be selected for NEFOP observer coverage.

The annual sea day schedule allocates sea days among lobster vessels that file vessel trip reports. Beginning on **April 1, 2024** all federal lobster permit holders will be required to submit electronic Vessel Trip Reports (eVTR).

Coverage Extent and Information

- The annual sea day schedule includes days tasked to the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions. The sea day schedule changes from year to year depending on data needs, funding, and other factors.
- The Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology (SBRM) Omnibus Amendment governs how NEFOP coverage is allocated to obtain discard estimates of the 14 federally managed species in the Northeast. Because many trips within the lobster fleet are made by vessels interacting with council-managed species, these trips are subject to NEFOP coverage.
- **Vessels are not responsible for covering the cost of observers in the lobster pot/trap fishery.**
- **The observer service provider is required to carry liability insurance in several categories as part of their federal contract.**

Lobster Pot/Trap Sampling

- Primary goals are to collect lobster catch data (kept, discarded) and sample bycatch.
- Observer coverage levels are determined by the SBRM and are derived by the Population Dynamics Branch of the Northeast Fisheries Science Center based on the variability in discards from previous years.
- Data are used by federal agencies (NOAA Fisheries) and other management partners (Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission and state agencies) to inform stock assessments and determine levels of bycatch.
- Observers record gear (i.e. number of pots, line type), haul level (i.e. location, depth, time, catch composition), and trip level (i.e. trip costs, home port) information.
- Biological information collected includes lobster sex, size, molt status, maturity status, egg stage, shell disease, number of claws, and v-notch presence/absence. Observers also collect data on any finfish caught.
- Interactions with protected species (marine mammals, sea turtles, seabirds) are documented.
- In order to deploy on lobster vessels, observers must complete a specialized pot and trap gear training and certification. Observers are well trained to be aware of the fast paced nature of the lobster fishery and potential safety hazards, including remaining clear of lines, traps, and other gear during the hauling, stacking, and setting process.
- All observers take an intensive safety course during their initial observer training, and are required to renew their safety certification every 18 months.

**For more information or
questions regarding
observer coverage in the
lobster fishery contact:**

**Kristina Thorpe:
(508) 566 - 5988**

or

kristina.thorpe@noaa.gov

As a fishery participant, your cooperation is important to help NMFS collect the most complete, unbiased, and relevant data possible. Good data prevent over-regulation and ensure the sustainability of our fisheries and the conservation of protected species populations.

How will I be notified to carry an observer?

Fishermen and fishing industry representatives will be notified in advance, whenever possible, that observer coverage will be required. Fishermen may be notified that they have been selected for observer coverage either by selection letter, phone, or in person by NOAA personnel or a designated approved observer service provider.

What are my responsibilities when carrying an observer?

- Allowing the observer to access all areas of the vessel.
- Allowing the observer to view navigation and access communications equipment.
- Allowing observer to sample, retain and store marine mammal and other protected species specimens or target and non-target species specimens.
- Notifying the observer when all commercial fishing operations begin /end.
- Providing accommodations and food equivalent to those provided to the crew.
- Allowing for the safe embarking and disembarking of the observer.

What are the vessel safety requirements I must meet to carry an observer?

- All vessels MUST have a current US Coast Guard safety decal; an observer may not depart on a trip selected for coverage until the decal is up to date.
- Personal flotation devices/immersion suits for all crew onboard (observers provide their own suit and PFD).
- Ring buoys or other allowable flotation.
- Unexpired distress signals / flares.
- Fire extinguishing equipment.
- EPIRB registered to vessel with current NOAA SARTSAT registration, battery and hydrostatic release.
- Survival craft with sufficient capacity to accommodate the total number of crew onboard including the observer.

Observers are required to review emergency instructions with the vessel operator and complete a pre-trip safety check of the vessel's emergency equipment prior to departing on a trip (observers arrive early to conduct the pre-trip safety checklist). Observers will be verifying that the equipment, registrations and certificates meet the requirements listed above.

What authority does NMFS have to cover federally permitted lobster vessels?

Federal lobster regulations [50 CFR 697.12](#) require federal lobster permit holders to carry a NOAA-approved observer, when selected. NOAA Fisheries also has the authority to select any category I or II vessels listed under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) for observer coverage. Northeast / Mid-Atlantic lobster pot/trap vessels are listed as category I fisheries.

For more information on authorization to cover the Lobster fishery:

See [CFR 697.12](#)

<http://www.ecfr.gov/> (Title 50)

[Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act:](#)

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/document/magnuson-stevens-fishery-conservation-and-management-act>

NEFOP Safety Checklist

For information on the Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology (SBRM) Sea Day Schedule visit: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/data/annual-discard-reports-northeast>

For more information or questions regarding observer coverage requirements, visit <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/new-england-mid-atlantic/fisheries-observers/fisheries-monitoring-operations-northeast> or contact Kristina Thorpe at kristina.thorpe@noaa.gov