

July 26, 2000

Dr. Dan Ito, Program Leader
North Pacific Groundfish Observer Program
National Marine Fisheries Service
7600 Sand Point Way, NE
Seattle, WA 98115

Dear Dr. Ito:

The Association for Professional Observers (APO) would like to express its gratitude for the NMFS pursuit of an independent review of the North Pacific Observer Program. I've had the opportunity to read both the MRAG report and the AFSC's response. The APO supports both MRAG's and NMFS' recommendations of the following and would like to see items 1-2 be pursued and in place by **January 1, 2001**:

1. The APO agrees with MRAG's first recommendation to clearly define the programs goals and objectives and prioritize their importance. Conflicting goals and objectives are a major stumbling block for observers and staff as well as industry. While we understand the need for observers to perform both biological sampling duties as well as have a role in collection of compliance data, the lack of clear priorities within the program leaves much of the observer's job open to interpretation. Once the goals and objectives are clearly prioritized, many of the current problems within the program will dissipate regardless of the service delivery model (SDM). We also suggest reviewing all relevant Congressional acts for required data collection needs so that all tasks are included and discussed up front.
2. Within the last 4 years, the APO has written numerous letters stating that a completely federal system would be ideal. However, we also know this option is unrealistic within current hiring limitations. The APO strongly agrees with the plan to move ahead with a pilot program to formulate a "no-cost" contract between NMFS and the current contractors. We also believe that the AFA catcher-processor and mothership fleet is a reasonable starting place for the pilot program because they are a discreet group of vessels which have a specific set of regulations. If industry isn't amenable to the AFA vessels for the pilot program we suggest some other sector that has the fewest number of contractors currently covering it.

Under a "no-cost" contract the contractors would be responsible to NMFS for data quality and the ability to supply professional observers, a responsibility they currently have little stake in providing. The industry (in this case the AFA vessels) would be guaranteed an observer and would be working with only one contractor in a given year. There would also be increased stability to the contractor(s) chosen as well as predictable expenses. NMFS would have the

- ability to discontinue a contract for non-performance of duties and would be accountable to the industry for guaranteeing an observer. The “no-cost” contract isn’t the long-term solution to the problems inherent with the pay-as-you-go SDM, however, it will decrease the perception of conflict of interest within this system. In the current environment where a lawsuit seems to be the only way to instigate change, the industry would benefit from *any* increase to data quality and integrity.
3. The APO supports the recommendations which would improve data quality and integrity including but not limited to: NMFS being responsible for rationally placing observers in a scientific manner (i.e. put observers where data is needed the most), alternative forms of data collection such as the Digital Observer Project and exploring other technology-based methods, revamping the evaluation of observers and their data, and establishing a certification system for observers that included the first 30 days of deployment as a training period.

The APO would like to work together with the NPGOP to form a partnership to accomplish the recommendations within the MRAG report. Please consider the APO and its membership a resource at your disposal. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kimberly S. Dietrich
Executive Officer

Cc: North Pacific Fisheries Management Council
Jim Balsiger/Sue Salvesson, NMFS Alaska Region