

Northeast Fisheries Observer Program Vessel Selection Information

In the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic regions of the United States, there are several fisheries that require observer coverage. Vessel representatives from these fisheries notify the Northeast Fisheries Observer Program prior to each trip or are contacted by the observer service provider to set up observer coverage.

Observer coverage for these trips is accomplished through three categories of observers: Northeast Fisheries Observer Program (NEFOP), At-Sea Monitors (ASM), and Industry Funded Scallop (IFS). For consistency, any reference to “observer” in this document refers to any observer or monitor working for NEFOP, ASM or IFS contracted providers.

Pre-Trip Notification System (PTNS): for Northeast multispecies (i.e. groundfish), Atlantic herring, and Atlantic sea scallop*

Vessels must notify for PTNS-eligible trips a minimum of 48 hours in advance of trip sail time. Vessel representatives can log into the application to enter notification, manage vessel information, and view notification history. Additionally, the PTNS phone line is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year so that fishermen may call in at their convenience. There is also an email available for fishermen to use for notification submission or asking questions. Vessels may also choose to email the PTNS team to submit notifications while at-sea by using their VMS unit.

When a trip notification is entered into the system, PTNS initiates an automated process that randomly selects notifications based on the coverage rate of trips in the same stratum. A stratum is a unique combination of notification characteristics that differ depending on the sampling program. For example, for NEFOP coverage a stratum is based on gear, port and region whereas ASM is sector, gear, fishing area, and exemption status. The random selection process applies to each notification as part of a stratum and does not take into account individual vessel information. After a notification is selected for possible coverage, providers are chosen by the system in a method dependent on the sampling program. For example, ASM randomly assigns providers in order of contracted proportions between the sector and provider. The selected provider(s) will receive information about the trip in their PTNS account and via email containing details such as the fishery, type of coverage (NEFOP or ASM), the type of notification, the sail date and time, and the vessel's port. The selected provider determines if they have an observer available in that area for that time and either accepts the trip or declines coverage.

PTNS selects notifications via a probability-based algorithm. The PTNS's algorithm self-corrects so that it selects notifications at a higher rate in a stratum when that stratum's system coverage is low and at a lower rate when that stratum's system coverage is high. Higher selection rates are evident at the start of the fishing year. “Front-loading” (high coverage at the start of the fishing year) is implemented to achieve observer coverage on enough trips to calculate an observed discard rate as quickly as possible. This feature also reduces the reliance on the previous year's data.

Notifications that do not result in actual trips are canceled in the system. Shorter trips of the ‘fixed’ notification style have a higher cancellation because of the business rules of that notification type and the realities of fishing of uncertain weather windows or repair schedules. Fewer trips and higher cancellation rates create fluctuations in stratum coverage rates within the system, especially at the beginning of the year. As more trips are taken in a stratum, coverage tends to even out to the target rates.

There are some non-random selection features as well. There is a second step to random coverage that evaluates the realized coverage of a vessel within that stratum against set thresholds for that stratum. If the vessel's coverage is below the low coverage threshold, the notification is automatically selected. The reverse is also true in which notifications are waived if the vessel's coverage is above a high threshold. These thresholds can be adjusted and turned on or off depending on the sampling program and strata.

Please see the Pre-Trip Notification System Instructions and FAQs (per fishery) on the help tab of the PTNS website for more information: <https://apps-nefsc.fisheries.noaa.gov/PTNS/index.php/help>.

*The Atlantic sea scallop fishery will be migrating onto the PTNS system for trips sailing on or after April 1, 2024.

Interactive Voice Response (IVR) System for Atlantic Sea Scallop*

The IFS observer program utilizes an automated Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system to record information on a vessel's intent to fish for scallops. The IVR has historically been used for notifications, but will be retired in March 2024. All scallop trips after April 1, 2024 will use the above-mentioned PTNS for notification.

The system is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year so that fishermen may call in at their convenience prior to a trip. Limited Access vessels are required to call into the system on a per-trip basis, and Limited Access General Category vessels are required to call once per fishing week (Sunday through Saturday), with each requiring 72 hours notice of intent to fish. Random selection of scallop trips occurs based on fleet, gear, and area fished and takes into account the vessel's previous observer coverage. Selection or waiver emails are sent by NEFOP via the vessel's VMS within 24 hours of notice of their intent to fish. If selected, fishermen are then required to contact observer provider companies to arrange observer coverage for their selected trip. If no observer provider company can provide an observer for the intended trip, the vessel representative may request a waiver from NEFOP.

Fleets with No Notification Requirement - all other New England Fisheries Management Council (NEFMC) and Mid-Atlantic Fisheries Management Council (MAFMC) Fishery Management Plans (FMPs)

The observer service provider for the NEFOP program will contact active fishermen in fleets requiring coverage according to the annual sea day schedule. Vessel representatives are primarily contacted via phone call, in-person communications, mailed letter informing them of selection for observer coverage, or a direct message to the Vessel's Monitoring System (VMS) as necessary. Vessel coverage rate and effort is monitored by observer program staff to ensure sampling is indicative of all effort in a given fleet.

In instances where direct contact with a vessel representative via phone call or in-person cannot be made, a letter is mailed to the address associated with the vessel's permits that informs them of a selection. The letter specifies why the vessel is receiving the letter and what type of trip the vessel is selected for including the next number of trips, days, declaration codes, gear codes, or all trips within a given time period. VMS messages may also be sent to vessels in order to more expeditiously select vessels.