



Joe Peplin unloaded skate, monkfish, dogfish, and lobsters at Chatham Fish Pier in July, as Environmental Police Officer Gus Lunedei kept watch. (Vincent Dewitt Photo for the Boston Globe)

Fishing watchdogs are left in dry dock

By Beth Daley, Globe Staff | September 5, 2006

The job description is not enticing for most college graduates: Live on a New England fishing boat for up to two weeks at a time and count the thousands of fish -- from hake to hagfish -- that are accidentally caught in nets and then thrown overboard, dead.

The information these hardy observers collect, however, is critical to scientists, who use the counts to help calculate how many fish are left in the ocean, and thus, how many can be caught without depleting stocks. Regulators then use that information to help set catch limits for fishermen.

But this year, federal budget cuts have sliced the number of these watchdogs on boats in the Northeast from 120 to 55. Last year, 12,535 fishing days were observed. This year, only about 6,700 sea days are projected to be.

“Observers are the most reliable method to get information about what happens on commercial fishing boats,” said Gib Brogan, campaign projects manager for Oceana, an ocean advocacy group that has been deeply critical of the cuts in observer coverage. “Without them, the estimates of how many fish in the ocean and how many fish can be caught can be wrong.”

Even some fishermen -- including ones who don't like accommodating observers -- are upset at the cuts. Some worry that without enough observers, scientists could overestimate how many fish are being killed at sea and make catch limits stricter. Others worry that some boats' discards might be underestimated, resulting in catch limits too lenient to maintain a sustainable fish population. Some cod and haddock fishermen, for example, suspect large herring trawlers are throwing away vast amounts of other valuable fish, yet observer coverage on the vessels is projected to shrink from 20 percent of fishing days last year to around 3 percent this year -- hardly enough for an accurate count, the fishermen say.

Federal fishery officials say the cuts are severe and restricted to the Northeast. That's because Congress didn't give additional funding for this region's observers as it had for the previous two

years to accommodate a judge's order to have 10 percent observer coverage on the days fishermen catch groundfish, species that include cod and haddock. The judge has since reduced that requirement to 5 percent coverage, after scientists said that was adequate to produce solid estimates, so Congress didn't appropriate additional money this year.

The biggest cuts are for observers of the region's beleaguered groundfish fleet, from about \$8.9 million last year to \$5.4 million this year. But other fisheries, such as herring, have fewer observers as well.

"Observers are extremely important and we are pushing [for more]," said William Hogarth, director of fisheries for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Observers, all with biology degrees, are trained to document what may seem an act of madness - the discard at sea of millions of tons of fish each year -- many of them dead. Some of the fish are species that fishermen don't want. But many, if not most, are valuable fish that fishermen are prohibited from keeping because the catch exceeds federal regulations on how many can be brought to shore. The fish -- which frequently die from the trauma of being hauled up from the sea depths -- are thrown overboard as fishermen steam home.

For decades, scientists didn't have observer data to calculate fish populations, relying more on what fishermen landed, surveys researchers conducted at sea, and rough estimates of discards. By the late 1980s, scientists realized that fishermen were hauling up a significant number of marine mammals in their nets, and a small observer program began to document the practice. Later, a piecemeal system began for fish discards, but it wasn't until 2001 that Congress began more regularly funding observer programs around the country. Since then, scientists say they feel more confident in their fishery assessments.

The observers, who can be paid \$195 to about \$280 each fishing day, undergo an intensive three-week training session at a year-old facility in Falmouth -- learning how to estimate fish discards, identify and measure fish, take biological samples, observe fishing gear performance, and perform safety training in case they are involved in an emergency at sea. They learn to perform necropsies on seals or other marine mammals, and have to go out on four training trips. The work is not for the faint of heart: Rough weather is common, and fish hauls can take place every two hours, 24 hours a day.

"The hours can be a bit tough -- you have to observe 80 percent of the hauls -- but I love it, although I did get seasick at first," said Ryan Ng, an observer with AIS Inc., a New Bedford company that hires, trains, and places virtually all the Northeast observers on boats. He's seen fishermen haul up tires, whale bones, and in one instance, a stove on Georges Bank. He's even helped resuscitate a loggerhead sea turtle caught in a net.

Fishermen are required to let an observer on board and do not receive any compensation. In the Northeast, most observers are paid with federal dollars, although some scallop fishermen pay for their own observers.

A group of Chatham fishermen, weary of the logistical and safety hassles of taking an extra man on their tiny boats -- and eager to prove to fishery regulators that they can fish in sensitive areas without killing too many threatened fish -- are testing technology that they think could one day replace some observers.

Recently, the 45-foot Lori B, sea gulls in pursuit, pulled into Chatham fish pier equipped with three video cameras strategically positioned above the deck that had captured what fish were thrown away at sea. The information, stored in an on-board computer, can be quickly downloaded and reviewed by fishery officials. The roughly \$9,000 system has a GPS to track boat speed and location, and sensors in the vessel's hydraulic system that record when equipment is running to haul up fish, so regulators can make sure the video data matches how many hauls took place.

“We see this technology as a solution,” said Tom Rudolph, research director for the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, which is testing the technology. He said the technical system won't replace all observers but could provide a cost-effective way to supplement them. “We realize in the future there are going to be times when there may not be enough observers.”

Beth Daley can be reached at bdaley@globe.com. ■