

**TENTH MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON TUNA AND
BILLFISH**

**16-18 June 1997
Nadi, Fiji**

**SOUTH PACIFIC FORUM FISHERIES AGENCY
TREATY ON FISHERIES
BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENTS OF CERTAIN PACIFIC ISLAND STATES
AND THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

OBSERVER PROGRAMME 1996/97

INTRODUCTION

The US Treaty observer programme is now in its ninth year of operation. Since it was initiated in 1987, FFA has administered the programme in accordance with the agreed statement on the implementation of the observer programme signed by the United States and the Pacific Island Parties. The objective of the programme is to collect scientific and compliance data and to ensure that US purse seine operations are conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Treaty.

COVERAGE

During the Eighth Licensing Treaty Period (8LP) June 1995 - June 1996, FFA observers collected data on 88,389 tuna. This consisted of measurements for 48,584 Skipjack and 35,655 Yellowfin. Data collected on Big-eye was low, with only 4150 Big-eye recorded for the period. All length frequency data was sent to SPC Oceanic Fisheries Programme (OFP) for analysis.

During the 8LP US purse seine vessels undertook 158 fishing trips that were suitable for observer placements. Thirty-two observer placements were made during the period, with placements carried out in the ports of Wewak, Rabaul, Honiara, Chuuk and Pago Pago. A comparison of the coverage for the last three licensing periods is presented in Table 1

Table 1 Trip and sea day coverage by Licensing period

| Observer coverage | 6LP | 7LP | 8LP |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Number of vessels Licensed | 42 | 47 | 47* |
| Total "Fleet Trips" suitable for observer placement | 199 | 206 | 158 |
| Observer trips completed during period | 31 | 38 | 32 |
| Percentage observer trip coverage (20% required by US Treaty) | 15.6 | 18.4 | 20.3 |
| Total fleet sea days | 8985 | 9301 | 9345 |
| Total sea days with observer coverage | 1768 | 2113 | 1864 |
| Percentage observer sea day coverage | 19.7 | 22.7 | 19.9 |
| Average sea days for vessel trip duration (US Treaty definition) | 45 | 45 | 59 |
| Average observer sea days per trip | 57 | 56 | 58 |

* 11 vessels (predominately Z Fisheries Company vessels) did not fish the entire period due to financial difficulties.

The shortest complete observer trip was 38 days with the longest observer trip being 110 days. The average time spent on vessels by observers was 58 days this has been steady for the last three periods.

The total sea days for the fleet in relation to the 158 vessel trips in the period were 9345. The total FFA observer sea days carried out on board US Treaty vessels for the period was 1864 sea days. Whilst the total vessel sea days did not change significantly for the last two periods, the average vessel sea days per trip increased, this was due to vessels waiting until they were full before transshipping, previously some vessels (especially the Z company) were completing trips when partially full. The observer coverage of 1864 vessel sea days for the 8LP period was 19.9 %.

Over the first seven licensing periods, the level of observer coverage has ranged between 9% and 18% (Table 2). For the first time since the inception of the program the 20% observer trip coverage requirement of the Treaty was attained in the eighth Licensing Period. Thirty-two placements represents a 20.3 % coverage of the total number of possible observer trips for the period. The ninth licensing period June 15th 1996 -June 14th 1997 was only completed last Saturday. A complete report on the data collected for this period is not yet available, however data analysed so far shows that the coverage figures will increase slightly. Figures for Length Frequency data is not available.

Table 2

| Licensing Period | Available trips | Available observers | Placements made | Level of coverage (%) |
|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| 1 st | 136 | 10 | 12 | 9 |
| 2 nd | 133 | 25 | 17 | 13 |
| 3 rd | 150 | 35 | 24 | 16 |
| 4 th | 216 | 40 | 22 | 10 |
| 5 th | 198 | 39 | 25 | 13 |
| 6 th | 199 | 40 | 31 | 15.6 |
| 7 th | 206 | 40 | 38 | 18.4 |
| 8 th | 158 | 75+ | 32 | 20.3 |
| * 9 th | Approx 160 | 110+ | 35 | 22 |

* Figures for ninth period are only estimates and need to be verified.

Observer National and Regional Training

FFA with the assistance of SPC has organised and conducted several regional training courses for observers to date. The aim of these courses was originally to maintain the number of trained observers at a level sufficient to achieve the target coverage of 20% of vessel trips.

On request by some FFA member countries, courses were conducted for the purposes of training observers for proposed national observer programmes. During 1996 and 1997 training courses were held in Palau, PNG, Solomon Islands and Fiji. To date, only the PNG programme has advanced to the stage of continually placing observers on DWFN vessels. Fiji is preparing to commence continual placements on vessels in the near future. The first trial placement having taken place last month. Both Solomon Islands and Palau are having problems with funding and getting DWFN's to allow continual placement on their vessels. Further assistance and a stronger resolve in placements may be required in these countries.

A recent regional training session (May/June 1997) was held in Fiji for countries that do not have observer programmes. Twelve observers from Cook islands, Niue, Nauru, Tonga, Tokelau, Marshall Islands and Vanuatu graduated from this course. Western Samoa and Tuvalu were invited but did not send trainees.

Papua New Guinea and Federated States of Micronesia have verbally indicated they may wish to have further observers trained for their currently operational programmes.

All successfully trained observers in national or regional programmes become eligible to be used in the FFA US Multilateral observer programme. Currently the FFA program has the availability of approximately 125 observers from 16 member countries.

Observer reports and data collection

The quality of observer reports and data continues to improve as observers gain more experience and are better trained. The introduction of the new FFA/SPC regional harmonised formats introduced at the start of the ninth period will further enhance this data collection. The observer data collection area and also the vessel catch report forms reports have focused on four main areas:

- * Collecting scientific data as requested by SPC.
- * Observation of all vessel and fishing activities, including reporting on other vessels or fleet activity;
- * Monitoring the vessel's compliance with reporting and other requirements under the Treaty;
- * Collecting information on crewing, gear technology and attributes of the vessels;

A review of the formats for harmonisation of data collection was undertaken with SPC during 1995 /1996. New formats were introduced towards the end of the 8LP. The format has been over hauled to avoid duplication of data collection and to make it more 'user friendly'. Changes to the data format were based on comments, from the Pacific Island Parties, NMFS, SPC, FFA observers DWFN's and other organisations involved in the collection and analysis of data. Full implementation of the formats has occurred in the FFA observer programme for the 9LP. Current and historical data is being entered on an observer data base that has been specially designed by the Information Technology section of FFA.

Future Data Collection

The priority data collected in the last few licensing periods has been length frequency data, (88,319 fish measured last period). There are many capable and well trained observers that are able to collect other forms of data, such as more comprehensive by catch and discard data. FFA US treaty observers collect a large proportion of observer data for SPC, and a diversification of the data collected would give a better understanding of the fishery.

It is suggested that selected experienced observers be given new data collection priorities to be determined by SPC and or FFA for their trips. All new observers and inexperienced observers would continue to carry out length frequency data collection if required.

Future of Observer Programmes

For any organisation or country to encompass responsible management with fisheries they must try to find what is going on in the fisheries. One the best ways to do this is to have well trained personal (Observers) on the spot recording data for the country and or organisation involved in the management of the fishery. Other than for programmes set up for a special purposes, the majority of successful national and regional observer programmes around the world collect scientific, compliance and technological data.

Proposed national and regional programmes should follow this trend and be set up to be as general as possible and be dynamic enough to collect quality data for all purposes. This would assist in the overall management of the fisheries not just one sector of management. There is not enough funds or personnel to have more than one programme set up in each country in the Central and Western Pacific.

With the proposed compulsory carrying of Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) on all DWFN vessels in FFA member countries by 1998, the role of an observer in checking compliance of position reporting will diminish. This will give more time and emphasis to monitor catches and collect data for scientific and other management purposes. The opportunity should be taken to rethink what data collection priorities could be given to observers in the future.

Future Regional Programmes

Many countries do not have the expertise or capabilities to run a national observer programme even though they may have a number of DWFN vessels fishing in their waters. The US Treaty is a successful programme in the placement of observers across the region and is achieving its target of 20% coverage. However many other fleets are getting very little constant coverage across the region, if any at all.

The mechanism to run a regional observer programme in the same lines as the FFA programme should be explored. Pacific countries would still negotiate on a bilateral basis for access, however the observer component could be removed and handed over to FFA/SPC to be run on a regional basis.