



**BELIZE HIGH SEAS FISHERIES UNIT
MINISTRY OF FINANCE
GOVERNMENT OF BELIZE**

Policy Name:	BELIZE AT-SEA OBSERVER POLICY				
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The marine environment is undergoing increased stress brought on by human-induced factors. "Freedom of the sea" is no longer a practical option as marine resources are becoming progressively scarce. Fishermen and fisheries managers must work diligently together to monitor the existing limited resources. However, to effectively monitor a fishery, managers need to measure how much resources is being removed from the sea. An Observer program is one of the best ways to achieve this objective because without this tool, managers are operating on conjecture. An observer program is used for collecting scientific and environmental data and this data is used globally by countries and conservation organizations, international agencies and a wide selection of scientists. Almost all the catch information from commercial fishing vessels used in publications by these institutions come from observer program data. Poor quality data impacts the ability to implement and adopt effective and timely conservation and management measure and self-reporting of catch data is not as accurate and effective in monitoring stocks.

In addition, the collection of sensitive information needs to be coupled by safe conditions for observers while onboard to guarantee their integrity and safeguard the quality and impartiality of the information collected by the program.

We can no longer ignore depleted stocks and bycatch issues. As the marine ecosystem becomes increasingly more stressed, it can no longer afford to be managed by guesswork. Whether or not to have an observer program is no longer a question. An unbiased system must be merged into fisheries management and economics to prevent fisheries collapse. If there is no system or the necessary resources to monitor a fishery to ensure its health, the fishery will eventually collapse.

2.0 PURPOSE

This At-Sea Observer policy serves to outline the guiding principles for the collection and reporting of reliable and accurate data for scientific, management and compliance purposes.

3.0 SCOPE

This program shall apply to all fishing vessels licensed by the Belize High Seas Fisheries Unit.

4.0 AUTHORITY

The Belize High Seas Fisheries Unit under the Ministry of Finance has autonomy for the implementation of this Policy and to ensure that the at-sea observer program is coordinated and implemented in accordance with Belize's regulations and appropriate international agreements, conventions and protocols.

5.0 LEGISLATION

National and international regulations and obligations delineates the importance for at-sea observation of fishing vessels to collect fisheries data for science and compliance purposes. The High Seas Fishing (Monitoring Control and Surveillance) Regulation, S.I. No. 39 of 2014 and the High Seas Fishing Act, 2013 serves as the principal documents guiding this Policy and the at-sea observer operations.

6.0 LEVEL OF OBSERVER COVERAGE

The At-Sea Observer Program shall cover all vessels including transshipment vessels and shall be carried out in conjunction with any Regional Fisheries Management Organization Observer Programs. The level of coverage shall be adequate to facilitate a robust assessment and evaluation of the effects of fishing. The Program will have a target coverage of 10% for catch and effort monitoring for each fishery. Observer coverage will therefore be representative of different vessel types in distinct areas and times. The exact level of observer placement will require periodic assessment to determine if the target level of coverage is achieved. Consideration will be given to high levels of coverage in some areas from time to time to address specific fisheries management questions and conservation measures.

7.0 CRITERIA FOR ASSIGNING OBSERVER TO A VESSEL

Fishing vessels are strategically selected for observer coverage. This strategy includes conducting annual evaluation of vessels' compliance and analyzing the risk of each vessel's vulnerability for committing infractions. This analysis considers the following criteria:

- Compliance with National Regulations
- Compliance with International/RFMO Regulations
- Compliance with Catch Reporting Requirements
- Compliance with VMS Requirements
- Compliance with Licensing Requirements
- Compliance with Financial Obligations
- Compliance with Requirements for Discharge Inspection and Observer Coverage.

Vessels that are found to have the lowest levels of compliance and are at risk for potential non-compliance are chosen to provide a more detailed analysis of the operations of the vessel while simultaneously collecting fisheries data.

8.0 RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING OF OBSERVERS

The BHSFU is responsible for the recruitment and training of observers for placement on Belize flagged vessels.

Scientific observers for the program should have the following characteristics:

- Technically trained or experienced with interests related to fisheries
- Ability to work at sea in difficult conditions for extended periods
- Ability to work under stressful, psychological and physical conditions
- Ability to work and interact with a vessel's crew in a cooperative manner for the entirety of the fishing voyage or until the deployment is terminated
- Soundness of mind and body

Independence and integrity

Observers should not have current financial or beneficial interest in the fisheries in which they will be required to operate as observers.

Observers should not have been found guilty of serious criminal offence for five years prior to appointment as observers.

Observer Training

There will be established a structured training program for the national observers. Training manuals and courses will be developed. The training program will include the following, inter alia:

- Briefing on the Observer Program to promote a full understanding of the rationale for the program.
- Fishery management and biological field collection programs including species identification, species collection and sampling procedures. Identification of bycatch species, such as sea birds, turtles, sharks, marine reptiles etc., and mitigation measures utilized in each fishery.
- Training on safety at sea and first aid.
- Protocols for dealing with difficult situations (personal conflicts and safety hazards)
- Preparation of reports
- Debriefing with observers to provide feedback on improvement

- Any additional technical training required for special projects.

Recruitment of Observers

We envisage to recruit and train observers in a wide variety of related fishery sectors to widen the knowledge and experience based on the observer cohort.

Observer Responsibility

During an assignment to a fishing vessel, a period which can span 5 to 30 days, the observer is assigned various tasks which define two basic responsibilities:

1. to monitor the fishing vessel's compliance with fisheries regulations respecting areas fished, fishing gears used, authorized fisheries, logbook recording methodology, catch reporting and by-catch restrictions and
2. to collect and record biological data from representative fish samples, such as sex, maturity, length and weight measurements, detailed species morphologies, stomach analysis, as well as catch and effort data.

Current Observer Program

Since 2014 the responsibility for the management of at-sea observer program has been delegated to Capricorn Fisheries, a company located in South Africa which provides this service to Belize in accordance with contractual arrangements.

9.0 THE OBSERVED VESSEL

A vessel selected for an observation is required to meet the national and international minimum requirements for the safety, accommodation, sanitary facilities, meals, equipment and communication systems equal to those afforded to an officer so that the observer duties are not compromised.

Before placing any observer on a vessel, the Coordinator for the Observer Program shall give the owners and/or operators reasonable notice of intention to place observer on the vessel and of its responsibility for the observer while they are on board.

10.0 INFORMATION AND DATA

Scientific data to be collected shall include the following categories of information, inter alia:

- a. Details of the vessel, including size, capacity and equipment.

- b. Summary of the observed ship, which will include information such as the observer name and identification, degree of experience, dates of embarkation and disembarkation.
- c. Comprehensive catch, effort and environmental information for each set that occurred while the observer was on-board the vessel, regardless if the set/haul was actually observed. This includes the target species, location fished and type of gear used.
- d. Fishing methods, including mitigation measures in use while fishing. The observer should record/describe mitigation measures, including the configurations what were in use during the observed period.
- e. Observed catch information for each period of observation, including the time at start and end of observation, the number of hooks observed, the observed catch in number and weight for all species caught to the extent possible.
- f. Biological measurements taken of individual targeted species, as much as possible, including its condition, length, weight, sex and details of samples, that were taken for analysis.
- g. Information on species taken and not retained and should include counts by species and their status

11.0 REPORTING

The observer shall provide a detailed report after each trip in accordance with the reporting requirements.

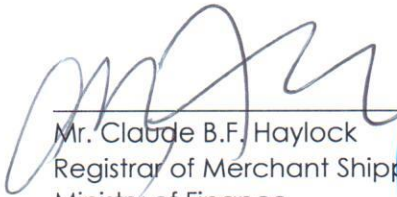
12.0 CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA AND INFORMATION

ALL data and information obtained through our National At-Sea Observer Program belongs to the Government of Belize. An observer or any institution providing this service to the Government of Belize shall not disclose any information without the expressed authorization of the Government of Belize.

13.0 REVIEW OF POLICY

This Policy shall be reviewed and revised as deemed necessary by the Director of the Belize High Seas Fisheries Unit. Relevant changes will be incorporated taking into consideration the effectiveness of its operation during the previous year.

This Policy is made in accordance with Part VIII, Section 50(1)(k) of the Belize High Seas Fishing Act, 2013, is hereby approved this 12 day of March 2018, at BELMOPAN, Belize



Mr. Claude B.F. Haylock
Registrar of Merchant Shipping
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Government of Belize



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