

# Industry offers to fund observers

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With the phaseout of joint venture fisheries and their accompanying on-board observers in the North Pacific, an information gap has opened threatening to hamper federal manage-

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ment of fisheries and creating a rift between industry members seeking a fair data collection program.

In an attempt to solve the problem, some commercial fishing groups claim they may have to dump hundreds of thousands of dollars into creating a program to gather information and help federal policymakers manage North Pacific fisheries.

This move is a radical change for domestic fishermen who, for the most part, have opposed any onboard observer or data collection program for U.S. vessels in the North Pacific, according to fishery officials.

But some commercial fishing groups question whether observers, knowing they are paid indirectly through the fishing industry, would provide fair and useful information critical to fisheries management — even if it meant cutting back on harvest quotas.

In the past, federal regulations called for foreign vessels fishing in U.S. waters to carry observers. These observers provided important resource information to fishery management agencies.

But the accelerating phaseout of joint venture fisheries has left officials looking for new methods of data collection.

According to Edward Evans, executive director of the Alaska Factory Trawlers Association, his group has committed \$100,000 to help start an observer program for domestic vessels.

"Such a system is necessary for the responsible management of the various fisheries managed by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council," Evans said in a December letter to commercial fishing groups.

In addition, the Alaska trawlers have asked other fishing groups to pledge contributions to the domestic observer program.

Evans said the trawlers hope they can establish a program to provide objective information for the management of Bering Sea, Gulf of Alaska and Aleutian marine resources.

But commercial fishermen, other than trawlers, are skeptical of the proposed industry-wide program.

Arni Thomson, executive director of the Alaska Crab Coalition, said in a letter to the council that a program providing data essential to conservation and management should be fair and serve the public interest.

"The Alaska Crab Coalition believes that it is inappropriate for a privately governed organization to

determine entirely for itself how such data will be acquired and utilized," Thomson said.

"This can be accomplished only within a framework established by state and federal law," he said.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council, meeting this week in Anchorage, is considering whether an industry-funded observer program would work or if some better option is available.

Dr. Clarence Pautzke, executive director of the council, said in a recent letter to other council members that the development of some form of observer program is likely.

"A new federal observer program is imminent following reauthorization of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. It has been estimated that as many as 50 observers may be needed to provide a minimum of 20 percent coverage of the groundfish fleet alone," Pautzke said.

The council has directed its Observer Committee to help put an observer plan together, he said.

In the past, the National Marine Fisheries Service has helped organize the collection of information for use by fisheries experts.

But according to industry members, the fisheries service doesn't have the legal authority to create a domestic observer program or the funding to back it.

Jon Zuck, of the Bering Sea Fisherman's Association, said it is a change for domestic fishermen to want an observer program.

"How to get it going, that's the big question. There's a need for it," Zuck said.