



Observer Requirements

Purposes of Observer Programs

Observers collect biological and fisheries-related data, such as catches for each set, species composition, gear attributes, set information, vessel attributes and non-target or bycatch species interactions. In some programs, depending on their mandate, observers record whether the vessel, master and crew comply with applicable national or regional fisheries regulations (i.e., are they high grading or discarding fish, retaining prohibited species or sizes, discarding trash or plastics, fishing with prohibited gear or in closed areas, interactions with species of special interest, setting on FADs, etc.).

Functions of Observers

Some national or RFMO programs prescribe strictly a “scientific” function for the observers, whereas others have a dual “scientific” and “compliance” function. Therefore, the functions of human observers onboard vessels can be divided into two components:

1. Collecting catch-related information and other scientific data (the science component), and/or
2. Monitoring the implementation of RFMO and/or national conservation and management measures or the terms of access or licensing agreements (the compliance component)

The data collected as part of the science component can also be used for compliance purposes, depending on individual RFMO measures, national laws, licenses or access agreements. For example, data on catches can enable the cross-checking of entries made in logbooks. Also, the information on fishing activities can be used to determine if a set was made in contravention of a time/area closure, full retention or live release or certain species requirements — or to identify the amount of catch made within a specific EEZ or high seas transshipment activities. This type of information can be valuable to the RFMO compliance processes, flag state and/or licensing State authorities, and vessel owners and fleet managers.

Human observers can also perform specific functions under seafood certification schemes where very close monitoring is required to meet the conditions of such schemes.

RFMO Observer Requirements

Human observer coverage requirements vary among the tuna RFMOs. In the WCPFC, IATTC, and ICCAT, 100% coverage is required for large-scale purse seine vessels. In the IOTC, a minimum of 5% coverage is required for various gear types, including purse seine.

For other types of fishing-related activities, such as at-sea transshipment by longline vessels, some RFMOs require 100% coverage of at-sea transshipment with transshipment observers on the receiving vessels. Large-scale longline vessels in IOTC, IATTC and WCPFC have a requirement of a minimum of 5% coverage. ICCAT requires a minimum of 10% coverage for longline vessels of 20m or greater LOA in 2025, 2026, and 2027.

All four tropical tuna RFMO scientific committees have highlighted that the 5% minimum requirement is inadequate to provide reasonable estimates of total bycatch, which hinders scientific input on effective conservation measures for










non-target species. A 100% observer coverage requirement for large-scale purse seiners ensures full and accurate collection of catch data, interactions with non-target species, and other scientific information, which are necessary for stock assessments and analyses.

For other gear types, such as longline, scientists have recommended that the minimum level of observer coverage should be at least 20% of the effort by gear type. Further, 100% observer coverage of at-sea transshipments ensures accurate data collection on catches (by species and geographic location) and monitoring to combat IUU fishing activities.

For a comprehensive review of **observer programs** in Tuna RFMOs please refer to [ISSF Technical Report 2023-08](#).

RFMO	Coverage Level and Observer Function				Program Design					Electronic Monitoring/Reporting	
	100% coverage of large-scale PS	Minimum of 20% coverage for large-scale LL	Scientific and compliance functions (e.g., data can be used for RFMO compliance purposes)	Binding measure to increase LL coverage towards 100%	Binding measure on observer safety	Clear data collection standards	Requirement that observer has no conflicts of interest, e.g., not a crew member or employee of the vessel, fishing company or carrier company	Defined Observer Qualifications	Standards for Observer Program Management (either RFMO or national program)	Standards for EMS	Standards for ER
IATTC											
	(AIDCP, Annex II, paragraph 2)				(Res C-18-07, A-18-03 and A-18-02)	(C-19-08)		Applies only to PS	Applies only to PS	(Res C-24-09)	
ICCAT											
	100% for all PS	Default minimum 5% coverage level (Rec 16-14) 20% required for active longliners over 15m bluefin fishery (Rec 22-08) 10% required for longliners greater than 20m LOA in the tropical tuna fishery (Rec 24-01)	Scientific and compliance only for bluefin. Each CPC can use the data collected under its observer programs in accordance with its national laws; those data may be used for compliance purposes by individual flag States.		(Rec 19-10)	(Rec 16-14)	(Rec 16-14, Rec 24-01, Rec 22-08)	(Rec 16-14, Rec 24-01, Rec 22-08)	(Rec 22-08, Rec. 21-15, Rec 16-14, and Rec 24-01)	(Rec 23-18)	

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CCSBT ¹	N/A	 Minimum of 10% for catch and effort as a target level (includes EMS)	Scientific only; but each member must include in National Reports to the Compliance Committee and Commission, a summary of the levels of compliance in relation to the implementation of mandatory mitigation measures							 New standards to be developed specific for the use of EMS in SBT	



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¹ All requirements are contained in the *CCSBT Scientific Observer Program Standards*:
https://www.ccsbt.org/sites/default/files/userfiles/file/docs_english/operational_resolutions/observer_program_standards.pdf