

Transparent Reporting of Observer Harassment, Injury and Death in Regional Fisheries Management Organizations

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Observer programs should publicly report on observer death, assault, harassment, injury, bribery attempts and interference. If an observer is experiencing these things they are most likely not able to effectively collect the necessary data for fisheries management. As these resources are publicly owned, whether or not fisheries observers are able to effectively monitor the fisheries is of public interest. Transparent reporting of this information allows for the accountability of the effectiveness of fisheries monitoring programs.

Last year an observer disappeared and is assumed to have died during an Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) Transshipment Observer Program assignment. Yet ten months later, at its 90th meeting, the agency reported that there were no problems in this program. It was as if it had not occurred when in fact there obviously was a problem that needed serious review. Three other observers in Regional Observer Programs in the Pacific either disappeared or died under suspicious circumstances within the last year. None of these deaths were publicly reported by the agencies in charge. Other observers may have died elsewhere under other RFMO programs but we are not aware of them because this information is not reported, so we cannot gauge the level of this problem. These obviously represent the most egregious offenses against observers. However, all offenses against observers, and their ability to do their jobs free from assault, harassment, bribery attempts and interference is increasingly becoming an international public interest issue as the public is becoming more aware of how RFMO fisheries are being monitored. This lack of reporting in light of such egregious circumstances concerning the safety of observers highlights a specific focus needed regarding the complexities involved in transparent reporting of observer information in internationally managed RFMO observer programs and how to overcome those obstacles.

Some ideas were discussed regarding how we could move forward with transparently reporting in RFMOs:

1. Establish a publicly accessible educational Internet-based portal that provides regularly updated information regarding all RFMO Regional Observer Programs;
2. Include existing publicized observer program reports;
3. Include in each RFMO section observer sampling protocols, manuals, and training materials. This is important to gauge what protocols observers are mandated to follow, what the objectives of the program are and how observers are able to achieve those objectives. It allows peer review of observer programs.

4. Include a description of fisheries managed under each RFMO and any crossover of jurisdiction;
5. Identify the current flow of observer data and information in various RFMO observer programs;
6. Establish independent resources for observers such as counseling services and a hotline for observers to report harassment and interference;
7. Provide recommendations for standards if needed.

By transparently reporting information about observers, public entities and organizations can easily access the information, which increases public trust in the reliability of the monitoring programs. By publicly reporting information about observers and observer programs, this allows greater agency control over the accuracy of the information but also increases accountability, which is a fundamental value in any democratic society.