

April 10, 2017

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC

The Honorable Dan Sullivan
702 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Don Young
2314 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington DC 20515

RE: NMFS bridge funding for Observers and EM

Dear Members of the Alaska Delegation,

In 2013, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) restructured the North Pacific Observer Program to improve at-sea monitoring by including hundreds of small, previously unobserved vessels in the program, and assigning vessels to either a full coverage stratum (100% of trips observed) or a partial coverage stratum. Observers in the partial coverage stratum are paid through an industry assessment system authorized under the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA). Vessels in the partial coverage stratum include more than 600 hook and line, pot, and trawl catcher vessels in Alaska. The 1.25% fee was projected to result in notably higher coverage levels for these vessels than we have today. However, the contract costs for observers under the restructured program are significantly higher than anticipated, causing coverage levels to be lower than anticipated. From 2013 through 2015, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) provided \$1.9 to \$2.7 million per-year in supplemental funding to get the program started and to increase coverage rates beyond what the fees alone could support¹. In 2016, NMFS ended this supplemental funding and the coverage rates based on fees dropped to 3% for vessels using pot gear, 11% for hook and line vessels, and 18% for trawl vessels.

The undersigned members of Alaska's fishing industry are concerned that these rates may be too low to provide the fisheries dependent, at-sea data needed to inform North Pacific management objectives. At their April 2017 meeting, the Council also indicated interest in increasing observer coverage rates, and started a process to identify options to increase coverage levels. The evaluation of these options and implementation of a solution, most of which require formal analysis and regulation, will be a two to three-year process. The restoration of NMFS supplemental funding and continued funding for integration of EM will help meet critical needs during this transition period, and we respectfully ask for your assistance in securing these funds.

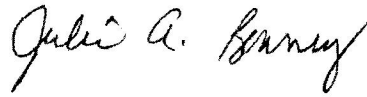
¹ North Pacific Groundfish and Halibut Observer Program 2015 Annual Report, Table 2.1, P 19.

Thank you for your consideration of this issue.

Respectfully,



Linda Behnken, ALFA



Julie Bonney, Alaska Groundfish Data Bank.



Malcolm Milne, NPFA



Nicole Kimball, PSPA



Jeff Stephan