

Scenarios for the future of the French onboard observer programme

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The new European Common Fisheries Policy, which entered into force 1 January 2014, changes the context of observation onboard commercial fishing vessels. Article 15 of the new regulation provides for a gradual reduction of discards by the obligation to land all catch of regulated species over the forthcoming years. These rules may affect the biases in observer programmes. First, deployment bias happens when the observed trips are not representative of the actual fishing activity. Second, observation bias happens because fishers behave differently when an observer is onboard. Both biases are likely to change under a discard ban, compared to the former CFP under which discarding was allowed. Therefore, unless powerful control and enforcement measures are implemented, the onboard observer data may become less representative of the actual fishing activities, and catches.

In France the onboard observer programme is part of Ifremer fisheries observation system (*Système d'Information Halieutique*, SIH), a permanent and integrated observation network, developed in close connection with fisheries science and advice. Any observation system incurs biases and uncertainties. In the SIH case, biases and uncertainties are difficult to quantify and interpret, because none of the data sources can be credited as a reference, owing to mis- or under-reporting, and various errors in data exchanges.

A number of methods are available to assess stocks, and all do not require the full range of data detailing the composition of the catch; if the discarded fraction is minor or constant, landings combined with abundance indices such as obtained from scientific surveys might be sufficient.

When the onboard observer programme was launched it was expected to provide data that would complement the scientific surveys towards an observatory of the marine ecosystem and fishing activities on a wide scale. However, recent investigations suggest that the potential uses of these data for research might be more restricted than expected, owing to sampling design and fishing strategies, which limit the coverage of these data with respect to the ecosystem and its interactions with fisheries.

Based on these considerations, we describe three possible scenarios for the future of the French onboard observer programme: (1) *Status quo*, (2) upgrade of onboard observation and landing sampling, or (3) withdrawal of science from onboard observation (and possibly even landing sampling), and upgrade of scientific surveys. Scenario (2) does not seem to be realistic owing to budget constraints. One merit of scenario (3) is a clear separation of scientific observation from surveillance and enforcement of fisheries regulations; but it would break the integrative approach of the observation system, with potential consequences for science and advice.