

CASE STUDY

Staffing to Support the Vital Work of NOAA West Coast Groundfish Catch Share Observer Program

Rebecca was just one person, one contractor, provided to a federal agency, but her professionalism and demeanor reflect the kind of staff TDEC strives to provide all of its federal clients.

Challenge: Under new NOAA regulations, the West Coast Groundfish Trawl Fishery transitioned to a Catch Share program in 2011. Instead of the traditional, single fleet-wide quota, which pitted fishermen against each other, this new approach used a Shorebased Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) program, providing equitable shares of the overall allowable catch (or “catch shares”).

The catch shares, according to NOAA Fisheries, are “designed to benefit both fish and fishermen. The program holds fishermen accountable for their deliberate catch as well as bycatch. This means that all fish harvested are deducted from the fisherman’s personal quota or the pooled quota (cooperatives), including fish that are discarded.” In order to monitor compliance, the Catch Share program required at-sea observers on 100% of its participating vessels, a four-fold increase over the number of observers then used. The at-sea observers are scientists who collect and analyze bycatch and other data to “promote sustainable and productive fisheries, communities, and ecosystems along the U.S. West Coast through innovative research, scientific discovery, and regional and international collaborations.”

This dramatic increase in the number of observers and the accompanying influx of data resulted in critical administrative needs, ranging from Observer onboarding to data entry.

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NOAA issued a solesourced IDIQ Task Order to TDEC for a Program Support Technician to handle these critical administrative functions.

Solution: In addition to understanding the scope of work, the task of staffing a position required a good sense of the workplace culture and what a good-fit looked like. With this insight, the TDEC hiring team quickly identified the ideal candidate for the job. Enter Rebecca Hoch. Rebecca was not a scientist – and it wasn’t a requirement of the job – but she was personable, smart, organized and resourceful, all of which made her an attractive candidate and she was selected by NOAA.

On its face, the position was very administrative, but, in reality, the Observer program needed someone who could adapt as the program evolved and matured; a “jack of all trades” as Rebecca described herself. Apart from the important task of data-entry, the position required interaction with members of the Observer community, from scheduling meetings to initial onboarding and annual reviews of the at-sea observers. Rebecca’s larger world-view allowed her to make the necessary judgement calls when dealing with observer candidates and contractors.

Results: Rebecca’s tenure at the West Coast Groundfish Catch Share Observer Program was evidence alone of her success in the position. Her impact on the program was widespread:

- From an administrative standpoint, Rebecca’s accurate and timely entry of data from the at-sea observers provided NOAA Fishery scientists the information needed to study and report on sustainable fishing practices, described by Rebecca “as critical to keeping fish in the marketplace.”
- Her adaptability to the multiple tasks at hand was a tremendous asset to the Observer program. Rebecca handled communications to observers and fishermen, via email, written letter; helped to format and design reports and other documents; and had even acted as a “spotter,” an on-shore observer, during at-sea safety sessions to assure participants’ safety. Finally, she was the keeper and archivist of the paper-based trip log data and logbooks.

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- Rebecca’s commitment to observer safety was both deep and personal. She understood the inherent dangers of every at-sea observer assignment. Eileen Sobeck, Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries described the work of the observers in an October 14, 2015 message: “The working conditions are tough. Observers work alongside fishermen in stressful, strenuous and at times hazardous conditions. Fishing is one of the most dangerous professions in the world. NOAA’s observers and monitors are right there with those doing the dangerous work.” As a result, Rebecca performed her duties relating to at-sea observers with the greatest of care and responsibility; “It’s about lives,” she added.
- Rebecca was also sensitive to the disparate and solitary nature and largely unknown work of the at-sea observers and worked to create the Observer community and shared its successes with the wider fishery management community. To that end, she oversaw the development of a quarterly newsletter “Word on the Waves” which included individual stories about observers, bycatch observations, Catcher Share program news, continued education and even seafood recipes. Rebecca wrote, edited and wrangled newsletter contributors!