



**TECHNICAL AND COMPLIANCE COMMITTEE
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Regional Observer Programme data management, status and budgetary implications

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Executive summary

Data management for the Regional Observer Programme (ROP) has been a long-standing line item in the Commission's budget; however, the amount dedicated to this work has never increased. Over the past several years, there has been expectation that electronic reporting of observer data would replace manual data entry, potentially reducing the workload and the funding required. The reality, however, is that the demands on this programme continue to increase with continued manual data entry of observer reports in addition to observer debriefing and transshipment reports. Due to the disconnect between the growing demands and the associated resourcing, the backlog of observer data awaiting entry continues to grow. This delay in availability of observer data has important consequences for Commission processes including assessment work, compliance evaluations, and for Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) audits, which often have strict timeframes and rely heavily on observer-reported data. To address the contemporary demands for observer data management, we estimate that an additional 2.5-3 staff, at an estimated cost of approximately \$60,000 USD per person per year, would be needed to address the backlog and ensure incoming observer data are processed in a timely manner.

TCC22 is invited to:

- Note the growing demands for ROP data management and the importance of timely availability of ROP data;
- Recommend the Commission increase the ROP data management budget by \$180,000 USD per year to support 3 additional Data Control Technicians to address the backlog of observer data and maintain a timely processing schedule for incoming data.

Overview

The Regional Observer Programme data management component of the WCPFC budget was initiated to support data entry, quality control, and general data management of these important data. The budget amount has remained constant since it was included in the WCPFC budget, at a value of \$923,904. This budget supports 11 data entry staff (one part-time), 1 data registry officer, 1 data quality technician, and the lead data manager (14 in total). The team primarily enters purse seine, longline, and pole-and-line observer logbooks but they also enter observer debriefing information, observer transshipment activities (which began in 2025), and US Treaty data (this task used to be carried out by FFA, but SPC has been tasked with it since 2023).

SPC staff are not the only ones entering observer data ([Figure 1](#)). Tonga, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Fiji are all entering some observer data, but their teams are not able to keep pace with the volume received, so SPC provides support. The WCPFC Secretariat currently employs 2 entry staff.

In recent years, there has been an expectation that with the availability and uptake of e-reporting tools, observer data entry would diminish. However, for various reasons, some observer data that are collected electronically are still submitted to SPC in pdf format for manual data entry. Therefore, the work volume has not decreased. The uptake of the OLLO e-reporting platform for longline observer data has resulted in a reduction in longline observer data requiring entry (~70 trips per year); however, other tasks and the ongoing volume of purse seine observer data means there remains a heavy workload for the SPC ROP data team.

The timeliness of observer data availability is becoming increasingly important for Marine Stewardship Council audit schedules, which often rely heavily on observer reports, among other national and Commission needs.

Data entry statistics

Observer trips

On average SPC receives approximately 1456 observer trips each year, in recent years (5-year average), and the team is able to enter approximately 1226 trips (5-year average). In 2025, 2677 trips were received and 1520 were entered by SPC ([Figure 1](#)). It should be noted that in 2023, the team partially focused on some of the historical backlog; however, that entry wasn't captured in the same way as contemporary trips, skewing the statistics for that year.



Figure 1: Observer trips entered by gear, year, and entity since 2019

From 2023, the data entry backlog has accrued at a rate of approximately 530 trips per year. During the COVID years when fewer trips were received, the team was largely able to clear the backlog; however, since normal observer and fishing operations resumed, the backlog has continued to accrue. Currently there are 1673 trips in the backlog ([Figure 2](#)).

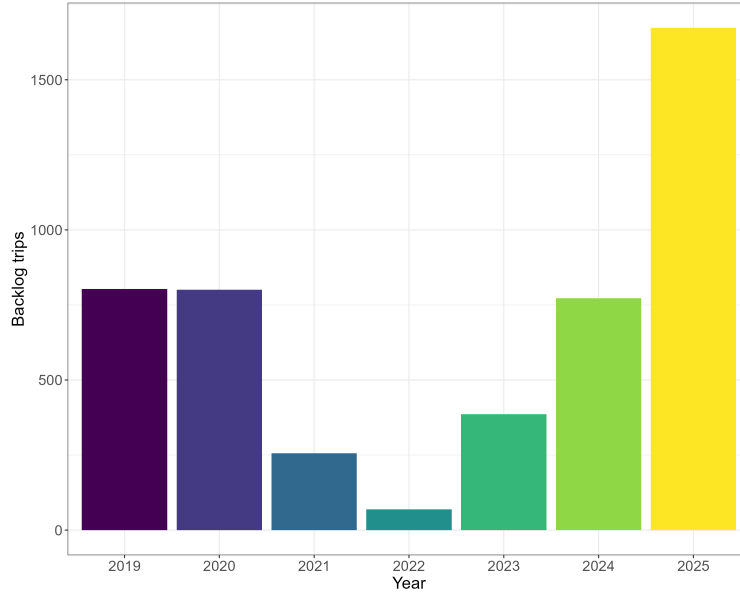


Figure 2: Observer trip backlog at the end of each year since 2019

We estimate 2.5-3 additional Data Control Technicians (DCTs), working at full capacity relative to SPC standards, would be required to keep up with the volume of trips received to prevent backlog accrual. An approximate estimate of a full-time DCT at SPC, including the full-cost recovery and 15% management fee is approximately \$60,000 USD per year. We estimate it would take the current team one year of full-time to work to clear out the existing backlog of trips, if they were only processing backlog trips as opposed to newly received trips.

Transshipment observer trips

With respect to transshipment observer data, this is a relatively new data source and in 2024 SPC received 43 trips for entry whereas in 2025 this number dropped significantly to 9 trips. It is unclear whether there is a backlog that has to be submitted or if fewer transshipments were observed in 2025 as compared to 2024. SPC has received 3 trips in 2026. There is already a backlog of more historical observer transshipment data that has been received by SPC, for trips between 2018 and 2024 (60 trips in total).

Potential solutions

The clear solution to the challenge of data entry capacity and a growing backlog of observer trips to be entered is to promote e-reporting for data submitted to SPC. However, that option may not be available for all data submissions. The SPC team has also been investigating the possibility of using artificial intelligence (AI) and optical character recognition (OCR) for processing the pdf submissions that are generated from e-reporting systems. The team has not yet had sufficient time

to devote to this investigation, but if significant manual data entry is anticipated to continue into the future, this may offer possible efficiency gains.

The immediate solution would be to hire additional DCTs to support data entry. Although we have estimated between 2.5-3 staff, this assumes a proficiency level for data entry comparable to the existing experienced team. Training and proficiency development for new DCTs can take time, and therefore, we would recommend hiring 3 full-time staff to try to reduce the backlog and to be able to process the incoming trips in a timely manner. It may also be possible to outsource entry to professional entities specializing in this work. This could potentially mitigate some of the training demands new SPC staff might face, depending on the experience levels of potential applicants. Costs and implications for out-sourcing this work have not yet been evaluated.