

Oral Statement of Julie Dale McNeese
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Before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
House Committee on Natural Resources

February 27, 2020

Chairman TJ Cox, ranking member Louie Gohmert, and the other Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to share with you the issues facing NOAA Observers and how our organization, Standing Together Against Rape (STAR), supports them.

My name is Julie Dale. I have been working in the sexual violence prevention field at STAR in Anchorage, Alaska, for over seven years and have been working closely with Observers and NOAA for over four. While the connection between the work a rape crisis center in Alaska does and the work NOAA does might not be immediately apparent, the reality is that Alaska has the highest rates of sexual violence in the nation, these incredibly high rates are not confined to our landmass but impact our offshore environments as well.

As a lifelong Alaskan, I greatly value the work observers do to help preserve our fishing industry in my home state as well as across the nation and am passionate about helping our fishing industries be as safe and sustainable as possible.

As you may be aware, NOAA Observers are professionally trained biological scientists gathering first-hand data on what is caught and thrown back, which supports science, conservation, and management activities. This data is used to monitor fisheries, assess fish populations, set fishing quotas, and inform management. Observers also support compliance with fishing and safety regulations. It is a necessary role for scientists in our fishing industry if we hope to maintain a fishing industry at all.

Commercial fishing is an inherently dangerous job, slippery decks, heavy equipment, isolation, and rough seas all contribute to the perils observers, and fish industry workers face at sea.

In addition to the job being inherently dangerous, Observers are immediately placed in a vulnerable position the moment they step onto a vessel as fishing crews often view an Observer as an “outsider” or “snitch.” Observers vulnerable position becomes even more perilous as it is combined with; being isolated, far from shore, for extended periods time, without access to communication with individuals off the boat, and potentially witnessing fishing violations that the vessel crew does not want to be reported. This can, and does, result in observers being pressured, harassed, threatened, and physically and/or sexually assaulted to either interfere or prevent them from completing their job.

While providing training, I have received first-hand examples from Observers of how this harassment starts. These examples include, but are not limited to, being told to schuck scallops, clean the slime line, measure crab, or cook for the crew. These duties are not part of the Observers job, and the intent is to remove them from their assigned position, so they are not able to perform their job functions. Therein lies the power and control. If an Observer refuses to participate in these behaviors, they are “not part of the team,” and if they do participate, the crew then can hold over their heads that they were not at their

assigned job. These harmful behaviors can escalate quickly and result in the Observers not having access to food, sleeping quarters, bathroom facilities, or the captain's deck. These tactics hold power and control over the Observers, which contributes to the sexual violence experienced by these individuals.

There is good work being done, but it is just not enough, there are some real barriers to Observers reporting and seeking help, and these can include, gaining a reputation for being a narc, not wanting to worry friends and family, not sure if it is a reportable offense, having to go back out on the same boat with the same crew AGAIN, and being blacklisted from the industry, not able to do the work for which they are so passionate.

The response Observers receive when reporting these behaviors is very disheartening and range from "well its just hazing,"

"what do you expect is going to happen on a fishing boat,"

"I bet they thought you were flirting with them,"

"I told you not to wear yoga pants," and

"Well it happened to me too, and I made it through just fine, you will get over it."

We need to create safe environments for our Observers and prevent further harm from happening by providing consistent prevention training for industry personnel, enacting enforceable legislation that holds individuals who harm accountable, and changing the norms from those that are tolerant of sexual violence to supporting and believing survivors.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear today. I would be happy to respond to questions.