



ROY COOPER
Governor

MARY PENNY KELLEY
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

Dear EGNP Holder,

As you know from your Estuarine Gill Net Permit, the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries Observer Program conducts observations of gill-net fishing activity in internal coastal and joint (i.e., estuarine) waters. These observations are a requirement of the State's Federal Incidental Take Permit (ITP) for sea turtle and sturgeon takes in the EGNP fishery. The ITP requires the Division to observe a minimum of 1% of small-mesh gill-net trips and 7% of large-mesh gill-net trips each season (fall, winter, spring, summer) in each Management Unit (A, B, C, D1, D2, and E; see maps included with this letter).

The Observer Program has had difficulty scheduling observed trips in advance and has occasionally not observed a sufficient number of trips as required by the ITP. Violating this permit condition could result in suspension or revocation of the ITP, which could require that the Division close the EGNP fishery. The Observer Program has developed an automated Observer Trip Scheduling System (OTSS) that EGNP holders must use to ensure the previously stated observed trip goals are met. By having all EGNP holders report planned fishing activity using OTSS, fishermen will be selected for observations randomly so that the observations accurately represent the fishery and all fishermen share the responsibility of being observed.

There are two options for fishermen to report into OTSS: an automated call-in option and an online entry option. When EGNP holders report into OTSS (phone call or online), they will be prompted to provide the primary Management Unit where they plan to fish, the mesh-size category they plan to use (small [<5 inches stretched mesh], large [≥ 5 inches stretched mesh], or both), and when they plan to fish by week group (Monday-Tuesday, Wednesday-Thursday, Friday-Sunday).

OTSS will also send automated notifications. These notifications will remind all EGNP holders of the deadline to report planned fishing activity. Additionally, these notifications will alert EGNP holders that reported into OTSS of their selection status. If they are selected to take an observer, they will be provided with their assigned observer's name and contact number. If they are not selected to take an observer, they will be provided a confirmation number that shows they reported planned fishing activity as required.

We understand this is a big change, and we want this transition to be as smooth as possible. For your reference, we are providing several informational and reference items in this packet.

Additionally, we will be holding six training meetings to introduce fishermen to the system and answer any questions. Please see the schedule below. During each meeting there will be a presentation from 6 p.m. – 7 p.m. Staff will also be available 30 minutes before and 30 minutes after the presentation to provide individual instructions and support.

Presentations are 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. Doors Open at 5:30 p.m.		
January 16	January 21	January 22
NCDMF Central District Office 5285 Hwy 70 West Morehead City	Hatteras Civic Center 56658 NC-12 Hatteras	Dare County Admin. Building 954 Marshall Collins Drive Manteo
January 23	January 28	January 30
Pasquotank County Library 100 East Colonial Avenue Elizabeth City	NCDMF Pamlico District Office 943 Washington Square Mall Hwy 17, Washington	Cape Fear Community College 411 North Front Street Wilmington

If you cannot attend these meetings or have any questions, please contact the Observer Program by emailing staff at Observer.Program@deq.nc.gov or by calling the Observer Coordinator, Christina Bland, at 252-515-5625.

Sincerely,

Matthew Doster

Matthew Doster



Observer Trip Scheduling System (OTSS)

Step by Step Guide

Step 1: Plan your fishing schedule for next week.

- Although this depends on weather and other things, plan which days you would like to fish EGNP-permitted gear the following week.
- If you are selected to be observed, you can always cancel your trip with your assigned observer if your plans change.

Step 2: Report your fishing plans to OTSS.

- Between 12:00 am Monday and 11:59 pm Wednesday, report your fishing plans to OTSS.
- Weeks are divided into three groups:
 1. Monday, Tuesday (M-Tu)
 2. Wednesday, Thursday (W-Th)
 3. Friday, Saturday, Sunday (F-Su)
- You have two options to report your plans:
 - Automated Phone Call System: 833-ITP-TRIP (833-487-8747)
 - Online: COMING SOON!

Step 3: Wait to hear if you've been selected to take an observer.

- Thursday after 12:00 pm, you will receive a phone call, text message, and/or email that will notify you if you were selected to take an observer or not.
- If you are selected: You will be given the name and phone number of an Observer for each week group you were selected to take an observer during (M-Tu, W-Th, F-Su). Contact the Observer(s) no later than 4:00 pm Friday.
- If you are not selected: You will be given a confirmation number for each week group(s) you were not selected for.
- NOTE: You may be selected for none, some, or all of the week groups (M-Tu, W-Th, F-Su)

(IF SELECTED) Step 4: Contact your Observer(s)

- By 4:00 pm Friday, you must contact your assigned Observer(s) to schedule your trip(s).
- If your plans change after 4:00 pm Friday, contact your Observer directly to let them know before the day and time of your fishing trip.

NOTE: It is unlawful for you to fish EGNP-permitted gill nets without either an Observer or a Confirmation Number.

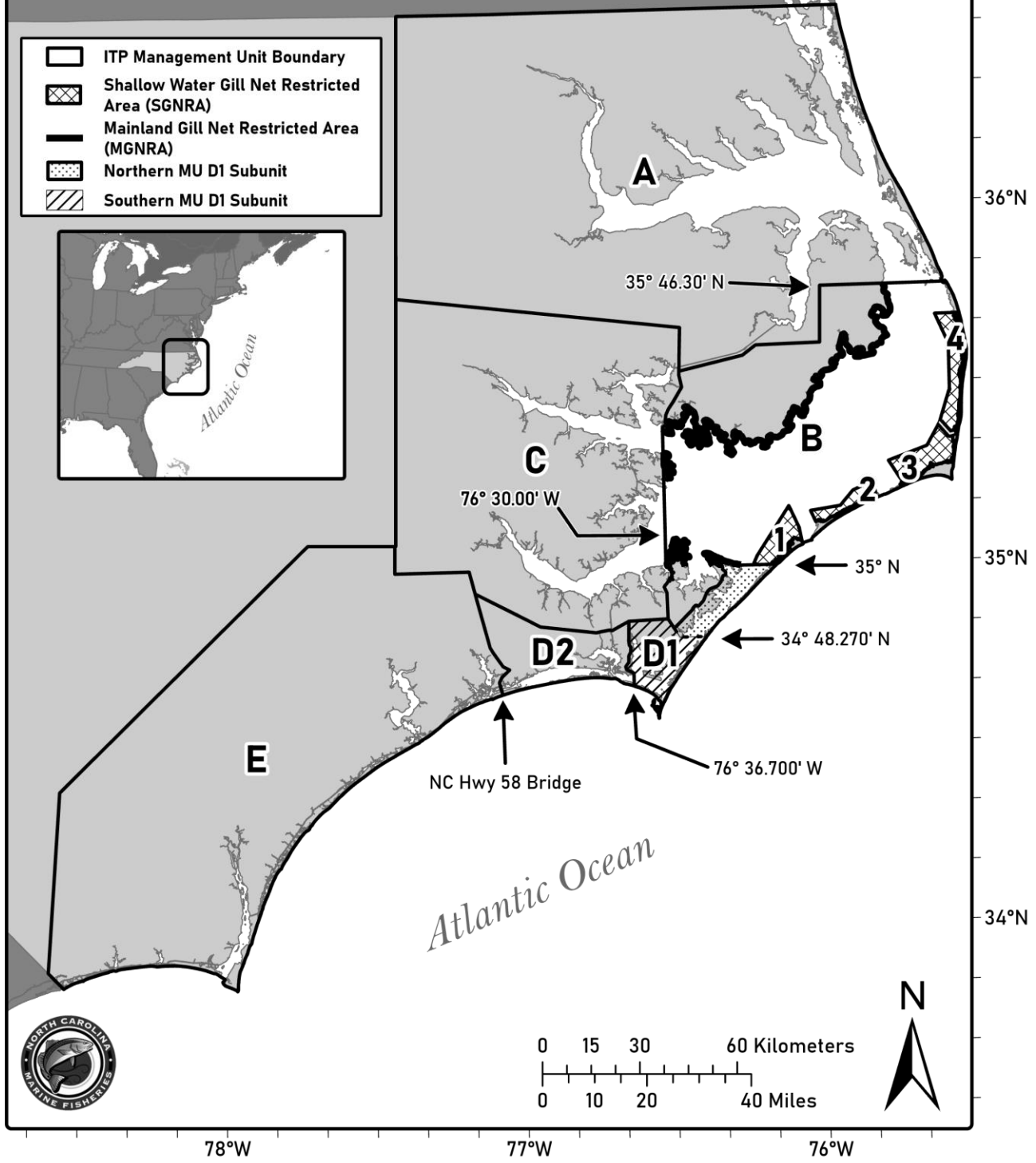
Contact Information

Observer.Program@deq.nc.gov

Observer Coordinator, Christina Bland, 252-515-5625

NCDMF ITP Management Units Updated December 2024

-  ITP Management Unit Boundary
-  Shallow Water Gill Net Restricted Area (SGNRA)
-  Mainland Gill Net Restricted Area (MGNRA)
-  Northern MU D1 Subunit
-  Southern MU D1 Subunit



OTSS Weekly Schedule

Reporting INTO OTSS

Each week between Monday at 12:01 a.m. and Wednesday at 11:59 p.m., EGNP holders who plan to fish at any time during the FOLLOWING week must report into OTSS by calling 833-ITP-TRIP [833-487-8747] or entering information into the online portal (URL coming soon). The OTSS will not accept any entries after Wednesday at 11:59 p.m. for the following week.

Notifications FROM OTSS

Each week, automated messages will be sent to you by phone call, text, and/or email.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
From OTSS	Reminder notification to submit report		Reminder notification to submit report	Notification of selection results	Reminder notification to call assigned observer, if selected		
To OTSS	Report planned fishing activity to OTSS for the following week by 11:59pm Wednesday						

Observer Trip Scheduling System (OTSS) FAQ Sheet

Q: What is OTSS?

A: OTSS is the Observer Trip Scheduling System. It is an automated system that collects information from fishermen about their plans to fish non-exempted gill nets in estuarine waters. OTSS will be used to randomly select fisherman to be observed.

Q: Why was OTSS developed?

A: The Observer Program has had difficulty contacting fishermen to schedule trips in advance to observe enough fishing trips to stay in compliance with our Federal Incidental Take Permits. To obtain a new Incidental Take Permit, the National Marine Fisheries Service strongly encouraged the Division to put OTSS in place.

Q: Who is required to report into OTSS?

A: Anyone who intends to use EGNP-permitted gill nets, including Recreational Commercial Gear License (RCGL) holders.

Q: Who is not required to report into OTSS?

A: If you do not intend to fish with EGNP-permitted gill nets, you are not required to call into OTSS. For example, if you plan to fish drift, run-around, strike, or drop gill nets (as defined by the most recent proclamation[s]) you do not need to call into OTSS.

Q: When do I submit a report to OTSS?

A: If you plan to fish during a given week, you must call OTSS or use the OTSS webtool between 12:00am Monday and 11:59pm Wednesday of the week prior to when you plan to fish. After Wednesday, the system will be closed until the following Monday. If you do not call during these hours, you will not be able to legally fish the following week.

Q: Why can I not submit my report the night before I plan to fish?

A: The Observer Program covers all estuarine waters in NC from Virginia to South Carolina. It is not possible to have an observer available for every area without planning and travel. Also, calling the night before does not allow the observer program to collect everyone's fishing plans and make a random selection that is not biased towards selecting whoever calls first.

Q: How far in advance can I report fishing plans? Two weeks prior?

A: You can only submit fishing plans during the Monday to Wednesday period the week before you plan to fish.

Q: Who do I contact if I have an issue while trying to report into OTSS?

A: If you have any problems or questions about OTSS, you can call the Observer Coordinator, Chris Bland, at 252-515-5625 between the hours of 8am to 5pm, Monday through Friday.

Q: What personal information will I need to enter?

A: You will only need your EGNP number and a phone number where you can be reached.

Q: What if I get a busy signal while calling in?

A: A busy signal will only occur if 50 other people are already on the line. Try calling back after a few minutes or use the webtool.

Q: Do I have to use my phone number as the contact number?

A: No. You may use any phone number that an observer can contact you at. For example, some fishermen prefer to have their deckhand coordinate with the observer. Whenever possible, please use a cell phone number.

Q: What if I made a mistake on my call?

A: If you made a mistake on your call and it is before the system closes on Wednesday at 11:59 pm, please call the observer coordinator at 252-515-5625. Do not call in again or use the webtool. If you made a mistake and it is after Wednesday, notify your observer of your mistake, and they will work with you. If it is after Wednesday and you are not assigned an observer or a confirmation number, unfortunately you will not be able to legally fish.

Q: What happens if I do not make first contact with my observer by 4 pm on Friday?

A: If you are selected and do not contact your observer by 4 pm Friday, you will not be legally permitted to fish during the following week, and your assigned observer will be reassigned to another fisherman.

Q: What happens if I do not fish when I indicated I would fish?

A: If you are selected, contact your assigned observer and update them with your fishing plans. If you are not selected, you do not need to do anything.

Q: What happens if I want to fish, and I reported to OTSS that I did not plan to fish?

A: If you reported to OTSS that you did not plan to fish during a certain week portion, you cannot legally fish EGNP-permitted gill nets during that time.

Q: What if I need to go fishing and I did not call into OTSS?

A: If you did not call into OTSS during the designated time, you will not be able to fish.

Q: Why is OTSS calling me, texting me, and emailing me?

A: All EGNP holders were opted into phone, text, and email communications in 2025. You can opt out of texts and emails if you prefer. If you would like to opt out of reminders, contact the Permit Office at 800-682-2632.

Q: How are fishermen selected?

A: Fishermen will be selected at random; however, any fishermen that takes an observer during the previous two weeks are less likely to be selected. If a fisherman does not take an observer after being selected (i.e., cancelled trip for the entire selected week portion), they will have a greater chance of being selected again.

Q: How will OTSS be enforced?

A: Marine Patrol will be checking fishermen on the water. Any EGNP-holder found to be fishing EGNP-permitted gears without either the presence of an Observer or a confirmation number will be issued an NOV.

Q: What happens if I fish without a confirmation number?

A: If you are fishing without a confirmation number or the presence of an Observer and are approached on the water by Marine Patrol, you will be issued an NOV.

Q: What if my observer does not show up at the meeting place on time?

A: If your assigned observer is not at the meeting place at the time previously agreed upon, call the observer first. Then call the Observer Coordinator at either 252-515-5625 or 252-864-7607. The observer program will get in contact with the observer and provide you with further instructions.

Q: What if I do not show up at the dock on time?

A: Please contact your assigned observer as soon as possible. Observers are present at the meeting sites from 30-minutes before the agreed upon time until 30-minutes after the meeting time. Additionally, Observers will attempt to contact you ONE TIME ONLY. If you arrive later than 30 minutes after the agreed upon time and do not answer the Observer's call/text, your trip will be cancelled and the Observer will be reassigned. If your trip is cancelled, then you cannot legally fish EGNP-permitted gill nets.

Q: Can I cancel a trip if I already scheduled one with the observer?

A: Yes. A variety of factors may influence the final decision to fish (e.g., weather, fish prices, boat problems). Please contact your assigned observer as soon as possible to cancel your trip.

Q: How many trips must be observed?

A: The number of trips varies month to month and by Management Unit (MU). The Observer Program must observe a minimum of 1% of total small-mesh trips and a minimum of 7% of total large-mesh trips.

Q: I sleep on the vessel to attend my nets, how will the Observer Program handle that?

A: While talking with your assigned observer, let them know of your plans and they will work with you.

Q: I do not fish non-exempted gill nets anymore, why do I keep getting contacted?

A: Any current EGNP holders will receive reminder messages and calls. If you would like to opt out of reminders, contact the Permit Office at 800-628-2632.

OTSS Call-In System Guide

EGNP Number

- "Please enter your Estuarine Gill Net Permit Number followed by the pound sign (#)."
- Press 1 to Confirm
- Press 2 to Reenter

Phone Number

- "Please enter a phone number where you can be reached."
- Press 1 to Confirm
- Press 2 to Reenter

Management Unit
(MU)

- Press 1 for MU A
- Press 2 for MU B
- Press 3 for MU C
- Press 4 for MU D1
- Press 5 for MU D2
- Press 6 for MU E

Gill Net Mesh Size

- Press 1 for Small Mesh (Under 5 inches)
- Press 2 for Large Mesh (5+ inches)
- Press 3 for BOTH Small and Large Mesh

Fishing Plans

- The week is divided into 3 groups:
 - Monday - Tuesday
 - Wednesday - Thursday
 - Friday - Sunday
- When asked if you're fishing for each group:
 - Press 1 for Yes
 - Press 2 for No
- To Confirm
 - Press 1 to Confirm
 - Press 2 to Reenter

Please DO NOT hang up until OTSS says:
"Your call has been logged."