Sara Weeks: This is Sara Weeks, and I am conducting an oral history interview with Rob Bland, a Northeast Fisheries Observer, on March 29th, 2023, at Falmouth Technology Park in support of the Northeast Observer Program project. Rob, tell us about where you grew up.

Rob Bland: I grew up in Michigan. So, I was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and then raised in a small town, just south of that, called Vicksburg. So, yes, I grew up in Michigan. I always went to the beach a lot. Our grandparents lived down a pond, a small lake, so I was always on the water, always boating, fishing, stuff like that, and always liked the outdoors. We always went camping. My parents always made an effort to, every summer, after school, go on family camping trips and just be in the outdoors and have a lot of fun.

SW: Do you have any fishing history in your family?

RB: No, no. Zero family history of anyone actively fishing commercially, or most of our fishing is just recreational for fun when I was growing up. My grandfather got me into fishing. He was a big avid recreational fisherman.

SW: Were they from Michigan as well?

RB: Yes. Most of my grandparents, uncles, and aunts live relatively close in Michigan.

SW: How did you make it to the East Coast?

RB: I made it out to the East Coast – back in sixth grade, my sixth-grade science teacher showed us a documentary called *The Voyage of the Mimi.* It was about humpback whale discovery and learning their habits and stuff like that, and it was on a sailing sloop. I always thought that was interesting. That got me into thinking about a life at sea or some sort of research into the aquatic and the oceanic environment. When I was just looking at schools, I happened to find one way up in Maine, in Machias, Maine. So, yes, that's where I went to school and that got me on to the East Coast.

SW: So, between sixth grade and college, did you remain interested? Did you visit the East Coast?

RB: Yeah. Like I said, our family went on vacations. We went to Acadia National Park a couple times. I fell in love with the East Coast by some of our vacations. We went down to Plymouth, Massachusetts, checked out the history about that. The towns are nice and quaint. Yeah, it was fun.

SW: Cool. How did you first get recruited to observe?

RB: Through college and stuff, I knew about the Alaska program, the program out West, and what that entailed. That didn't really interest me too much. So, then just doing some digging on the internet, I found the East Coast program. I've never heard of it before, but it sounded interesting. I just applied to the contractor that had the current contract.

SW: Okay. So, you didn't get recruited?

RB: No, I didn't get actually recruited. No one came to our school or anything like that. No, it's just finding a posting on the internet.

SW: Okay. Tell us about your first experience with your provider, and maybe during the training. When did you train?

RB: I trained in June of 2004.

SW: Where did you train?

RB: We're trained at the place where we were staying. We're trained at the Admiralty Inn, which is a little hotel conference area in Falmouth, Massachusetts. So, our training, they told us, was a little bit different than the normal training work because they actually had training – because everything was all in the same building and whatnot. The trainers were good, and it was fun.

SW: What did you think about the job duties at that point during the training?

RB: At that point during the training, everything seemed to be cut and dry. They trained us well enough to know the paperwork and what their expectations were of how they want the data presented and stuff like that. So, that part was really, really easy to understand and to grasp. The going out to sea part and the actual life at sea part, not so much. That was all learning once we were set free. [laughter]

SW: Okay. So, did you feel prepared to do the job coming out of the training?

RB: Yes, I felt prepared – prepared that I could correctly get the data that I needed to get and stuff like that. But I wasn't necessarily prepared about all the ways I was needed to try to get that data, or how to work with fishermen, where to actually be on a boat, or stuff like that. Because my boating experience was a couple research vessels and stuff like that, which had nice plus accommodations. You knew what to do. Every day was kind of the same until their job was done, where fishing every day is kind of the same, but could also be different. It all depends on the conditions of the water at that time or where they're fishing, how they're fishing, what they're fishing.

SW: So, tell us how long you've been observing.

RB: I've been observing now since 2004 straight, so that's now eighteen, just over eighteen and a half years.

SW: Tell us about your experiences. What are some of your fondest memories of observing up to this point?

RB: Some of my fondest memories – just all the neat stuff that we get to see that no one else gets to see while we're out to sea.

SW: Like what?

RB: That we just go offshore and you can just look everywhere and all you see is water.

SW: How far offshore have you been?

RB: I've been out to the two-hundred-mile mark, but I've also been farther offshore than that, doing some other transit trips for the NAFO [Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization] program. So, traveling from the states all the way out to the Grand Banks, you actually get way farther offshore and stuff like that.

SW: What's it like out there?

RB: It's interesting. It's mostly the same.

SW: What was the weather like in your experiences?

RB: Being out on the Grand Banks is different just because you're out there where all the – there's fishing in the summertime. So, I was out there where the hurricanes like to converge. After they're done here, that's where they go. They follow the canyons, they follow the curvature of the ocean bottom itself. That's right out there, right in their path. So, I've ridden out two hurricanes in a small boat.

SW: How small?

RB: It was probably seventy-footer, seventy-foot boats.

SW: So those were NAFO trips?

RB: Those were NAFO trips.

SW: Can you tell us just a bit more?

RB: So, they were fishing – the ones I had right out of a hurricane, they were fishing for halibut. They were doing that by doing demersal longline. So, "tub trawl." They would throw out a baited hook on these long strings of gear, and they'd haul them in using a small hauler, a little bit bigger than a lobsterman's hauler, but not quite as big as a red crab fisherman's hauler, they're a little bigger, and they would just grab halibut.

SW: How long were the trips?

RB: Those trips would be anywhere from – not anywhere. Most of those trips are twenty-plus days. So, they were twenty-plus days and they were going in and out of Sambro, Nova Scotia, which is just south of Halifax. So, I would go in and out of there for a couple months at a time and then come home, and then go – not back out to those trips, but then back up to doing the NEFA program stuff.

SW: Tell us about riding out a hurricane on the Grand Banks.

RB: Well, the boat I was on, yes, it was a little small, but she was a very good seaworthy boat. She pretty much rode like a duck. She'd go up the swells and down the swells, up the swells and down the swells.

SW: Did you get seasick?

RB: Not really. Surprisingly, I did not get seasick on those. But probably because I was out to sea many days before the actual storm came, so I got used to just how the boat rode and just being out on the water.

SW: Tell us about some of your NEFO, Northeast Fishery Observer program, trips. What's your favorite trip? Favorite gear type?

RB: My favorite gear type and trips to do I would have to say are the red crab trips nowadays. I do a lot of red crab trips. I like the length of the trip that they are. The boats are good sized boats and nice. The guys are great to work with that are on those boats.

SW: How many people?

RB: There's usually five total. There'll be four guys that work the deck and then your captain. I just like how the trips go because you usually work during the day, you sleep at night. You can work the day, sleep at night, and yes, they just happened to work out. The scheduling on those books are very nice because having to wake up at 2:00, 1:00, 3:00 in the morning is not always fun, [laughter]

SW: How far offshore do they go?

RB: They go out to the canyons. So, they're fishing the canyons along the continental shelf.

SW: How is the weather there? Have you had any experiences that are –?

RB: Yeah. We've had storms that come up, but nothing like a hurricane. I mean those guys, because they're closer to the land, closer to port, if there's something that bad coming, they're usually – they'll head in.

SW: So, those are your favorite types of trips. Tell us about the accommodations you might have on those vessels.

RB: Most of those vessels you get your own bunk, not necessarily own room, but you get your own bunk, so you got plenty of space there. The boats are a little bit on the older side, so the accommodations are – they look a little rough, but they're still some of the nicer accommodations just because of having your own bunk, you got plenty of space. The deck space you get to work on is ample. It's plenty big so you're not cramped for workspace. The food is usually pretty good on those boats. Also, they'll prepare one, maybe two meals a day. Usually, lunch is on your own, but usually, you get breakfast and dinner.

SW: How about sampling? How hard is sampling a red crab trip?

RB: It's not too bad. You're out there for the entire time that they're pulling up a string. Usually, that could be three hours, sometimes more, but mostly around the two-and-a-half to three-hour mark. So, you're out there the entire time, and you're just grabbing a pot, a crab pot every five pots that come up. So, usually by the time you're done with one, you get maybe one or two pots to wait, and then you're grabbing another one to do. So, yes, some of it at the beginning is a little bit high-paced just because you're trying to measure the crab at the time. But then when you're done with your crab measurements, you're mostly just sorting and sorting takes less time than crab measurements. So, yes, you usually get one or two crab pots, a little break, and then you grab another one, one or two, get a break, grab another one. The time goes by relatively quickly.

SW: How do the fishermen feel about having you on those trips?

RB: They don't seem to mind. I get along well with most of those crew guys. Their captain and the crew they're jovial with you. They'll tell you their life story, how they're doing, their life work, relationships, and stuff like that. So, yeah, you get along pretty well with those guys.

SW: How do you get along with some of the other crews and captains on different types of gear, not your favorite types of the other types of gear that I know you cover? Is it always jovial?

RB: It's not always jovial, but it's usually most of the time for me, it's somewhat respectful just because they know I've been doing it for so long that I'm not someone fresh off the training schedule that's just starting to learn the job. For me, I get along well with most crew and people like that just because they know I've been doing it a while. They don't always have to babysit you as far as safety wise about where to stand or not to stand. They'll tell you, "Hey, on this boat, just do this while you're on the boat," before you head out on deck to do your job. Most of the time, you're like, "Okay." But for the most part, because I've been doing it a while, I know where to stand. I know where not to stand.

SW: Do you think those are some of the challenges new observers might have?

RB: Yes. Yes. The dance of being safe, and also trying to get the fish or the scallops or the stuff that you need to work up. Yeah. I think that’s a big challenge for the newbies, just not knowing exactly how to ask for things or how to work collectively with the fishermen.

SW: Have you ever felt unsafe?

RB: There's been a couple boats that I've felt unsafe. But most of those boats are no longer fishing just because they were older.

SW: Was it the condition?

RB: Yeah, it was the condition of the vessel. One incident was just because there was nothing that – the vessel was safe and all that. It was just during a haul back on a scallop trip, the scallop dredged got hung up on a rock or something. It got hung down. So, while it's hauling back, it actually pulled part of the stern of the boat it was on underwater because it was a light boat. They had to stop the winch before we could do all that. That was probably one of the fewer times that I was the least safe was when the mechanism on the boat was actually pulling the boat underwater. [laughter]

SW: What did you do in that circumstance?

RB: I was halfway back into the wheelhouse to grab my survival suit.

SW: What time of year was it?

RB: This was springtime, so it was a springtime trip. So, yes, I was part way into the wheelhouse to grab my survival suit because it was real close right by the door, just on the bench that was inside. But they stopped the winch, and the boat popped back up, and then they had to – not use the winch, but just put the boat back in gear to get it off the rock or whatever it got hung down on. That was the only scary part, seeing green water coming over the stern of the boat when it's not supposed to.

SW: What about other challenges for new observers? You talked a bit about that, but I just wanted to explore that more from your experience. Scheduling trips?

RB: Yeah. Probably a little bit of scheduling trips, knowing where the boats are because some boats can be tricky where they're docked. Some docks are tricky. Knowing the proper balance of when to arrive at a boat, being well prepared. I mean, when we're first taught, we get a bunch of gear, and some of the gear is not always needed. Just knowing what to bring for whatever type of trip you're going on is a big help. Because yes, we do bring a lot of stuff on, but the least amount of stuff you can bring on is usually best. Sometimes, captains will comment about that, about "You got enough stuff there." Just stuff like that. Knowing what you actually need to bring is good because the less it looks like you're bringing on, the better.

SW: Do you train new observers, or do you ever give advice to new observers?

RB: I've given advice to observers. My company gives out my phone number with my permission for new observers to give me a holler if they have questions on new gear types that

they're going out on. I can give them pointers here and there [about] what to do.

SW: Do they take advantage of that? Do they call you?

RB: Yeah, I've gotten called quite a few times for red crab trips. They'll give me a shout and say, "Hey, I'm going on my first red crab trap. What do you recommend compared to … This is what we teach in-house. What do you use from that, or what's extra that you'd use?"

SW: What are some sort of tricks of the trade that you have that have allowed you to stay and enjoy this work for nineteen years?

RB: Just having a good work-life balance, so with the –

SW: How do you do that?

RB: It could be tricky, but I'm married, I have kids. The biggest thing I do, when I can, is for the length of the trip is I will try to take almost that much time off between trips. Most of my trips are multi-day trips. I do day trips here and there, mostly as filler as I need it, or if a vacation's coming up that I'm taking. Get that so I know I don't skip a vacation. I can start my vacation when I want to start my vacation. Most of my trips are multi-day. If I do a seven-day trip, I might take four to seven days off before I do the next one. If it's a ten-day trip, I might take seven days off before I do the next one an djust having that balance that I know I can take days off before I go on the next one but still getting my day requirement. It helps out big time with the work-life balance.

SW: Tell us about some of the ports that you have taken trips out of.

RB: I've taken trips out of most of the major ones on the Northeast coast that we cover. I've gone all the way up to Jonesport, Maine, and I've done some trips up there. I've done down to Portland, Maine. I've done most of the big ones out of Massachusetts, Boston, Gloucester, New Bedford, and a bunch of day trips that are – most of those are out on the Cape, so out of Chatham and Provincetown. But I've also done out of my area. I've gone all the way down to – oh, what was it? Beaufort, North Carolina, and I've done trips out of there, and up in Wanchese, North Carolina, done trips out of there. Then, Virginia, Hampton Bays area. Some ports around there, I've done trips out of.

SW: What are your favorite ports to go out of and why? The Northeast?

RB: The Northeast is where I do a bulk of my trips. But some of the nicer trips to go out of are some of the more southern, just because of the southern upbringing, the southern hospitality. Those guys are usually a little more laid back when it comes to having the observer on the boat. Where some guys up here in the Northeast because they get the groundfish coverage plus the extra SPRM (Sperm Whale Recovery Plan?) coverage, they can sometimes get a little crankier by having observers. The southern guys, most of that is just SPRM coverage. They're more inclined to be nicer to you or help you out a little bit more just when you're on their boats.

SW: How do you deal with the crankier fishermen?

RB: Just try to do your job as best you can, look busy. Because if you look busy, you like you're being a hard worker. They'll be more inclined to be nicer to you, or they'll lose a little bit of their attitude towards you. Some of them, you just have to flat out just stay away from and do your bare minimum of ask the questions when needed and walk away. That's it. [laughter]

SW: Sounds like you've been able to travel a lot for this job in the past nineteen years. Tell us about some of your best trips. You've traveled to different areas and learned something new, maybe.

RB: Yeah, I liked traveling down to the Outer Banks, so Wanchese and Beaufort area, North Carolina. Just because when I'm off, I was doing some trips down there. When I had some time off, I got to explore different areas of the country that I've never been in before. So, got to see Kitty Hawk and where the Wright brothers took off and did some exploring of Roanoke Island and some other stuff in between trips. Stuff like that because it's fun to do.

SW: Fishing is so different down there. Tell us about some of the differences between that area and the Northeast.

RB: Yes, it's just down there they have different species of fish and a lot of them all look the same. [laughter] Knowing your fish ID [identification] is very good down there. But also, because I do fewer trips down there, I also usually have to bring references to learn some of the southern fish species. But going for those species, it's fun to see. Going for croaker trips, some of the other interesting things that pop up in croaker, when you do get a fresh catch of croaker, you learn why they're called croaker because they just make a croaking sound when they're on deck. So, yeah, it's fun to check out how different guys fish, even though the gear types are the same. One dragger is almost no different from another dragger you can't discern, but how they use their gear is kind of fun to watch.

SW: Tell us about some of your challenges. Were there any challenges to acclimating down South for some of those trips?

RB: No, not really. I mean, you're living in a hotel, which is – so having stuff separate in my car usually is what I did from – this is my boat gear, this is my personal gear for when I'm on land and whatnot. Nowadays, I've been doing it now – everyone has usually a smartphone. So, getting around is a lot easier versus back when I first started. Even though it was 2004, you think, "Oh, that's not that long ago." Yes, we had to use almost paper maps. Stuff like that was done on the internet. We didn't have smartphones. Getting around was a lot harder back in the day. But now it's real simple with the smartphones and all the technology you have in your pocket. [laughter]

SW: Right. What other things? So, you have observed for nineteen years. You've seen a lot of change. Can you think of anything else? The smartphone, but any other technology that the

industry uses?

RB: Oh, yeah. We use a lot of new technology now, from tablets for when we have to upload trips and stuff like that. When I first started, my trip upload was nothing but a phone call. [laughter] I just called and said this is the type of trip I went on, and there were a few questions prompts and that was it. That was the end of the day. But now our trip is almost all uploaded onto a tablet and it's almost a duplicate copy to the paperwork. On some trips, it's almost a duplicate copy of a regular trip. So, yes, there's a lot more stuff that we've had to learn on the fly, from tablets to digital cameras because before, we just used point-and-shoot cameras to InReach, where we can talk to shore help or significant others or family from a texting standpoint on boats. Yeah, just all kinds of new things which has added more work to the program from when I first started.

SW: Well, expand upon that. What do you mean exactly? So, technology has made more work and not less.

RB: Yeah. The stuff that we gathered has been pretty much the same since day one. We're gathering discards and we're quantifying those discards. Why are the fishermen getting rid of those discards or why are they keeping what they're keeping? Most of the time, it's because they're selling. That's their livelihood. Sometimes they're using it for bait or for other programs, but most of the time that's their livelihood. They're keeping it. But then, the actual physical work on deck has not really changed much since I started. But how we present that data has changed from when I started. So, when I first started, it was nothing but just handwritten paperwork, "here you go" at the end of the day, and then you were done with it. Nowadays it's the handwritten paperwork plus transcribing that onto a tablet, which is pretty much the same thing digitally. Then just how we label things now with all these photos and stuff that we have to take. Just more piled on.

SW: How long does it take you after you get off a boat to finish up your trip data?

RB: Yeah. Most of the time, because I do multi days, for a multi-day trip, my data is almost practically done by the time I hit the dock. As far as that's concerned, it's almost done. My at-home work is pretty much just an edit, me just glancing at it, [going], "Okay, did I get all this from –? Did I do all this right? Did I dot my T's, cross my I's, all that fun stuff." Then it's just a download. It's labeling photos mostly when I'm at home as well because I don't usually do that while out to sea.

SW: Do you think that's because of your experience? Would a new observer spend a lot of time after a trip finishing up their data?

RB: I've heard new observers spend a lot of time editing their stuff at home instead of out to sea. I like to get it done while it's still fresh in my mind.

SW: Tell us about the InReach. It's a relatively new tool.

RB: Yes.

SW: Do you use it, and what is it for?

RB: I don't use it that often. It's a tool to communicate with staff. If you're having issues trying to gather data, if the crew's being difficult, it's a good tool for that just to let people know here on land that your trip might be a little difficult, or if there's a safety issue, or anything like that. It can also be used just to communicate with family here and there. That's what I use it mostly for. If I know I'm coming in, but I know I'm going to be coming in like 2:00 in the morning, I'll give my wife a heads up saying, "Hey, no one's breaking into the house. It's just me showing up around two o'clock in the morning." [laughter]

SW: Would your debriefers say about you and your trip data?

RB: My debriefers in the past and my current ones say that my stuff looks pretty good when it comes in. There's not a whole lot that needs to be done with it. I mean, a few things here and there. But for the most part, it's pretty good.

SW: Has it been that way for nineteen years?

RB: Yeah. It took me a year to get to that, but yes. [laughter]

SW: What would the captains and crew say about you on the red crab boat? We kind of talked about it, but what about some of the other gear types? What would they say about your work or your work ethic?

RB: I think most of them don't mind that I'm on the boat. I've gotten that from quite a few captains. Some captains have even asked me, they're like, "Hey, if you don't want to observe anymore, give me a shout. I'll give you a job." So, most of them, I think, once they get over the fact that they have to take an observer, appreciate that I'm on the boat, or don't mind that I'm on the boat just because of my work ethic. I get along with the crew. I don't try to cause trouble. I try to get the stuff that I need without being bossy or telling the crew what to do and how to do it. [laughter]

SW: Tell me about some of the sacrifices you feel you've had over the nineteen years of your career.

RB: Well, having kids, I don't get to see everything that they do. I've missed some birthdays here and there. I've missed some holidays here and there. You know [with a] life at sea, you're going to miss a couple of things. But for the most part, I do try to plan my time accordingly to be home, but sometimes you just can't.

SW: How does your family deal with that?

RB: They deal okay. That's all they've known. Since I've had a family, this is the only job I've

had is being an observer. It's all they know, so they get used to it.

SW: Have you seen the fishermen struggle with these types of challenges?

RB: Some of the newer guys, the younger guys. Me doing this for over eighteen years now, I'm sometimes one of the older persons on the boat. [laughter] Some of the younger guys, yes.

SW: Struggle?

RB: They sometimes struggle with holding family life and stuff like that.

SW: The work-life balance.

RB: The work-life balance.

SW: Tell us about your contributions. What do you feel are your contributions in this position to the science or the management in New England fisheries?

RB: [laughter] I hope I'm giving NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] and NMFS [National Marine Fisheries Service] the information that they need to make the correct management calls by trying to have my data be as clean and accurate as possible so that the right calls can be made because they are making decisions that are going to be impacting other people's livelihood.

SW: Well, thank you very much, Rob. We appreciate it, and I know your data have done exactly that.

RB: Well, thank you. You're welcome. [laughter]
----------END OF INTERVIEW----------
Reviewed by Molly Graham 3/30/2025