New England Fishery Management Council

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Daniel Salerno, *Chair* | Cate O'Keefe, PhD, *Executive Director*

MEMORANDUM

DATE: January 26, 2026

TO: Cate O'Keefe, Ph.D., Executive Director

FROM: Scientific and Statistical Committee

SUBJECT: Response to Terms of Reference - Overfishing Limits and Acceptable Biological Catches for white hake for Fishing Years 2026 to 2030

The Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) met via webinar on January 21, 2026, to address Terms of Reference (TOR) for white hake. The SSC had recommended OFLs and ABCs for this stock in October 2025 for Fishing Years (FY) 2026-2030 based on 70% F_{MSY}, which is consistent with the white hake rebuilding plan (Option B of the ABC control rule). In December 2025, the Council asked the SSC to reconsider its recommendation, specifically to consider an option based on 75% F_{MSY}. This memorandum updates the SSC recommendation.

SSC members in attendance: Dr. Conor McManus (Chair), Dr. Edward Camp (Vice-Chair), Dr. Anna Birkenbach, Dr. Adam Delargy, Dr. Lisa Kerr, Dr. Gareth Lawson, Dr. Kai Lorenzen, Dr. Jason McNamee, Dr. Richard Merrick, Dr. Mateja Nenadovic, Dr. Fred Serchuk, Dr. Michelle Staudinger, Dr. Sam Truesdell, Dr. Hiro Uchida, and Dr. John Wiedenman.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

A. Consider the results of the most recent stock assessment for white hake and information provided by the Council's Groundfish Development Team (PDT). Reconsider prior SSC recommendations for FY 2026-2030 OFL and ABC for white hake based on 75% F_{MSY}, considering the Council's groundfish ABC control rule, Risk Policy, and white hake rebuilding plan.

TOR FINDINGS

The SSC received a presentation from the Groundfish PDT on possible OFLs and ABCs for white hake for FY 2026-2030, recapping the outcomes of the 2025 management track assessment for white hake, prior SSC recommendations, and updated work of the PDT since the SSC last discussed white hake in October 2025. The 2025 assessment for white hake uses an age-structured model (ASAP) that found the stock status is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. White hake is in a rebuilding plan with a rebuild date of 2031 and the fishing mortality rate ($F_{rebuild}$) is set at 70% F_{MSY}.

After deliberation, the SSC reaffirmed its recommendations made in October 2025, to set OFLs and ABCs using 70% F_{MSY}. The SSC recommends an OFL of 1,943 mt and an ABC of 1,393 mt for FY 2026, an OFL of 1,760 mt and an ABC of 1,261 mt for FY 2027, an OFL of 1,640 mt and an ABC of 1,174 mt for FY 2028, an OFL of 1,618 mt and an ABC of 1,157 mt for FY 2029, and an OFL of 1,698 mt and an ABC of 1,215 mt for FY 2030 for the white hake stock. The recommended OFLs and ABCs aim to prevent overfishing, are consistent with the Council's ABC control rules and white hake rebuilding plan, and consider the Council's Risk Policy Statement.

RATIONALE INCLUDING SIGNIFICANT SOURCES OF UNCERTAINTY

The SSC discussed new information provided by the PDT, prior information that was still relevant, and its remit under the groundfish ABC control rules implemented to meet Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) National Standards.

The new information provided by the PDT to the SSC included additional, quantified details regarding short-term socioeconomic ramifications of recommending catch advice per 70% F_{MSY} instead of 75% F_{MSY}. These included assessments made via the quota change model (QCM) that calculated the potential FY 2026 difference in revenue between these two catch levels at about $2M, which included predicted differences in white hake and other groundfish landings expected to be constrained by white hake. Notably, the PDT report specified that the QCM is not suitable to make longer-term predictions of differences in catch, including potentially how fishing at 75% F_{MSY} could negatively affect future landings if it exacerbated the potential for white hake to rebuild, further depleting the spawning stock biomass (SSB).

The SSC was also presented with additional detailed projections of SSB and rebuilding timelines under both catch advice options as well as different recruitment assumptions. These indicated that under both options, white hake is not expected to be rebuilt on schedule (by 2031), with both options rebuilding the stock within the same year (by 2035, under the assumption of long-term recruitment). Notably, the stock is not expected to be able to rebuild on schedule even at F=0 and under the more optimistic assumption of long-term recruitment. The PDT report clearly stated that the approaches used to assess differences in SSB and rebuild time were of insufficient precision to quantify with confidence the differences between the two catch advice options. The SSC discussed that the additional details regarding SSB and QCM were useful, and also that they were at least qualitatively similar to assumptions made during the October deliberations–i.e., that 70% F_{MSY} could be expected to have meaningful socioeconomic short-term costs born by the industry (as described per public comment and inferred per recent utilization data) and that it was likely that the stock would not be rebuilt under 70% F_{MSY} by the rebuild date, unless there was an unexpected increase in recruitment.

The SSC briefly discussed their remit for providing catch advice under the control rules developed to meet MSA National Standard 1, noting that the control rule states that catch advice should be consistent with rebuilding. Several SSC members noted that, because the catch advice at 70% F_{MSY} is inconsistent with the rebuilding plan, the SSC could be justified in setting catch at a substantially lower level. The SSC also noted that they were being asked by the Council to choose between two options–providing five years of catch advice at 70% F_{MSY} or at 75% F_{MSY}, and the SSC was uncomfortable with setting catch at 75% F_{MSY} for a full five years.

The SSC noted the potential reasons that could be used to justify 75% F_{MSY}, including:

1. The quantified short-term (FY 2026) socioeconomic predicted increase in revenue under this option ($2M),
2. The small differences in expected SSB and rebuilding time under the two catch advice options, and
3. The perception, especially as informed by much appreciated public comment, that the existing white hake reference points might no longer reflect the true present-day productivity/capacity of the stock.

The SSC noted the potential reasons that could be used to justify 70% $F_{MSY,}$ including:

1. Stronger adherence to the control rule that specifies that catch should promote rebuilding of stocks in rebuilding plans, and that providing the lower catch advice is preferable to advice that is expected to exacerbate the projected future overfished status of white hake.
2. Although there is uncertainty in the SSB that would result from the two catch options, catch at 70% F_{MSY} would likely result in greater SSB than would 75% F_{MSY}.
3. Fishing at 75% F_{MSY} could result in long-term socioeconomic costs; the greater stock reduction expected under 75% F_{MSY} led to more substantial harvest restrictions. It was noted that the QCM precluded calculations of present-day economic costs and benefits under the two scenarios, including the appropriate discounting of future harvest gains/losses. The QCM evaluations describe potential changes in revenue and do not describe uncertainty in the projected impacts.
4. None of the information presented suggested the assessment and resultant projections were flawed or overly pessimistic. Rather, the SSC noted, in agreement with the PDT's report, that the recruitment assumptions used in the assessment and projections were, if anything, optimistic–and that using alternative assumptions such as first-order auto-correlated recruitment, or stock-recruit-model based recruitment assumptions that accounted for the diminished stock size leading to lesser expected recruitment–would have resulted in lower projections and thus catch. The SSC especially noted the PDT's statement that a decision to increase catch would essentially suggest the assessment was overly pessimistic, which there is no evidence for this.

The discussion focused largely on the SSC's remit to provide advice most consistent with the control rule, that the SSB should be expected to be higher under the 70% F_{MSY}, and that the inability to precisely quantify the differences in rebuild time was insufficient justification for knowingly exacerbating the failure to rebuild. These points were the primary justifications for the SSC maintaining its recommendation for 70% F_{MSY}, which the SSC considered the best option for satisfying control rule Option B. This decision is consistent with the information provided by the PDT. The SSC's recommended ABCs are not likely to result in overfishing for this stock, as the projected harvest rate (F=0.123) is less than the assessed overfishing rate.

The SSC noted that one source of uncertainty not accounted for was uncertainty in the calculations of socioeconomic costs and/or benefits under the quota change model. SSC members noted that any future expectations of revenue would need to be predicted and discounted for present day value for comparisons. It was also noted that there was unquantified uncertainty even in the FY 2026 revenue calculations under 70% F_{MSY}, including related to intra-

and inter-annual variation of past white hake quota lease prices, how these might change under the new catch advice, and run-on consequences these would have for other groundfish landings.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS AND RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

The SSC's research recommendations remain unchanged since its November 12, 2025 memorandum, including transitioning to WHAM to explore model uncertainties and evaluating recruitment specifications for short-term projections. With regards to recruitment, a greater understanding of whether the recruitment projections and methods that are currently used are more realistic than those that may better reflect the current state of the stock (e.g., autocorrelated recruitment, those derived from dynamic linear stock-recruit modeling) would be useful, as a significant component of the deliberations included whether projections under 70% F_{MSY} represent optimistic or pessimistic predictions.

The SSC would like to emphasize its gratitude to the PDT for the further synthesis of information to best understand the socioeconomic tradeoffs of setting catch advice at 70% F_{MSY} and 75% F_{MSY}. The SSC would also like to thank the members of the public who provided additional comments that informed the SSC deliberations. While the reported economic impacts on white hake and other fisheries was appreciated, discussed, and understood by the SSC, the Committee believed that increasing fishing mortality could not be justified during its rebuilding plan at this time. In recent years, the SSC had recommended using 75% F_{MSY} instead of the rebuild catch guidance at 70% F_{MSY}; however, the stock's slowed progress towards rebuilding and continued low recruitment ultimately led the SSC to recommend following the control rule at this time.

The SSC also discussed in what scenarios would economic effects from a catch advice decision warrant deviating from harvest control rules or outweigh the biological uncertainty. Through its deliberations on white hake over the last several months, the SSC believes this stock would benefit from being considered a case study for how harvest control rules could be modified to accommodate these scenarios (e.g., stocks no longer overfished, but not rebuilt and not projected to be rebuilt under recruitment assumptions). Additionally, such scenarios would be useful for consideration by the Risk Policy Working Group as they continue developing prospective plans and rubrics, and for additional discussions regarding the appropriate integration of National Standard 8 with the National Standard 1 and the related harvest control rules.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **SSC recommends an OFL of 1,943 mt and an ABC of 1,393 mt for FY 2026, an OFL of 1,760 mt and an ABC of 1,261 mt for FY 2027, an OFL of 1,640 mt and an ABC of 1,174 mt for FY 2028, an OFL of 1,618 mt and an ABC of 1,157 mt for FY 2029, and an OFL of 1,698 mt and an ABC of 1,215 mt for FY 2030.**
2. **The SSC continues to recommend use of a state-space assessment modeling platform (e.g. WHAM) to explore the uncertainties previously described by the SSC and PDT.**

3. **The SSC again recommends evaluating how recruitment should be specified in white hake short-term projections and reference points during the next assessment.**

Fishing Year	OFL (mt)	ABC (mt)
2026	1,943	1,393
2027	1,760	1,261
2028	1,640	1,174
2029	1,618	1,157
2030	1,698	1,215

DOCUMENTS

To address the TORs, the SSC considered the following information:

1. Presentation by Council staff
2. Groundfish PDT memo to the SSC, January 14, 2026
3. September 2025 Management Track Assessment
    a. 2025 Management Track Assessment Peer Review Report, October 4, 2025
    b. Stock Assessment Support Information portal*
4. Risk Policy Matrix for white hake
5. Framework Adjustment 69, Affected Environment Human Communities (Section 5.7), March 11, 2025
6. Previous SSC recommendations
    a. Recruitment assumptions
        i. Meeting materials: August 10, 2023
        ii. SSC report: August 31, 2023
    b. FY 2024-2025 OFLs and ABCs
        i. Meeting materials (original meeting): September 8, 2023
        ii. SSC report: September 15, 2023
        iii. Meeting materials (addressing data correction): October 27, 2023
        iv. SSC report: November 13, 2023

c. FY 2026-2030 OFLs and ABCs
    i. Meeting materials: October 21-22, 2025
    ii. SSC report: November 12, 2025
d. Correspondence

Background Documents

1. The Council's Risk Policy Statement and Concept, implemented January, 2025
2. NOAA/NEFSC 2025 State of the Ecosystem Reports for the Northeast U.S. Shelf