2026 Essential Fish Habitat Designation Framework Initiation

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What is Essential Fish Habitat (EFH)?

- Defined in Magnuson Stevens Act as waters and substrate necessary for spawning, breeding, feeding, and growth to maturity
- Species and life stage-specific, based on the best available scientific information, includes maps and text
- Purpose: Guide development of conservation measures
  - Council, when making fishery management decisions
  - Other federal agencies via EFH conservation recommendations, under NMFS' EFH Consultation process,
- Administrative designation; no restrictions on fishing activity are directly associated with EFH designations

2026 EFH updates: How did we get here?

2004-2018 (effective 2018)	NEFMC Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2 (OHA2)
2017-2022 (updates ongoing)	Northeast Regional Habitat Assessment (NRHA)
2024-2025	EFH Five-Year Review (joint w/ MAFMC, presented to Council January 2025)
2025 (final action Sept 2025)	2025 EFH Designation Framework
2026	**2026 EFH Designation Framework**

Related Initiatives:

- *MAFMC Inflation Reduction Act 4: Climate-Ready Updates to EFH Source Documents*
- *NEFMC 2026 Habitat Priorities:*
  - *HA1: Develop revised EFH designations for groundfish, small-mesh, and scallops*
  - *HA5: Continue to advance Fishing Effects Model analyses, integrate habitat information into Council*
  - *initiatives, maintain expertise, and share habitat products with regional partners.*

Three-year schedule – *single* Framework per year

Year	# spp	Planned Species
2025	10	Atlantic cod, Atlantic herring, Monkfish, Skate complex (barndoor, clearnose, little, rosette, smooth, thorny, winter)
2026	16	**Atlantic sea scallop**, **Small-mesh multispecies** (red, silver, & offshore hake), **Large-mesh multispecies** (Acadian redfish, American plaice, Atlantic halibut, Atlantic wolffish, haddock, ocean pout, pollock, white hake, windowpane flounder, winter flounder, witch flounder, and yellowtail flounder)
2027	2	Atlantic salmon, Deep-sea red crab

Likely range of alternatives

- No action: Current EFH designations from OHA2 (text and maps)
- Single action alternative to update EFH designations for each of the 16 species. For each species:
  - Designations consist of specific, mapped locations to be designated as EFH and a text description
  - Designations are life stage-specific (egg, larval, juvenile, and adult)
  - For juvenile & adult stages, maps are based on predictive outputs of species distribution models (SDMs)
    - Where possible, separate maps for juveniles and adults
  - Habitat PDT considering the need for updated egg/larval maps given limited data for those life stages
    - Considering need for egg and larval maps in an EFH consultation context

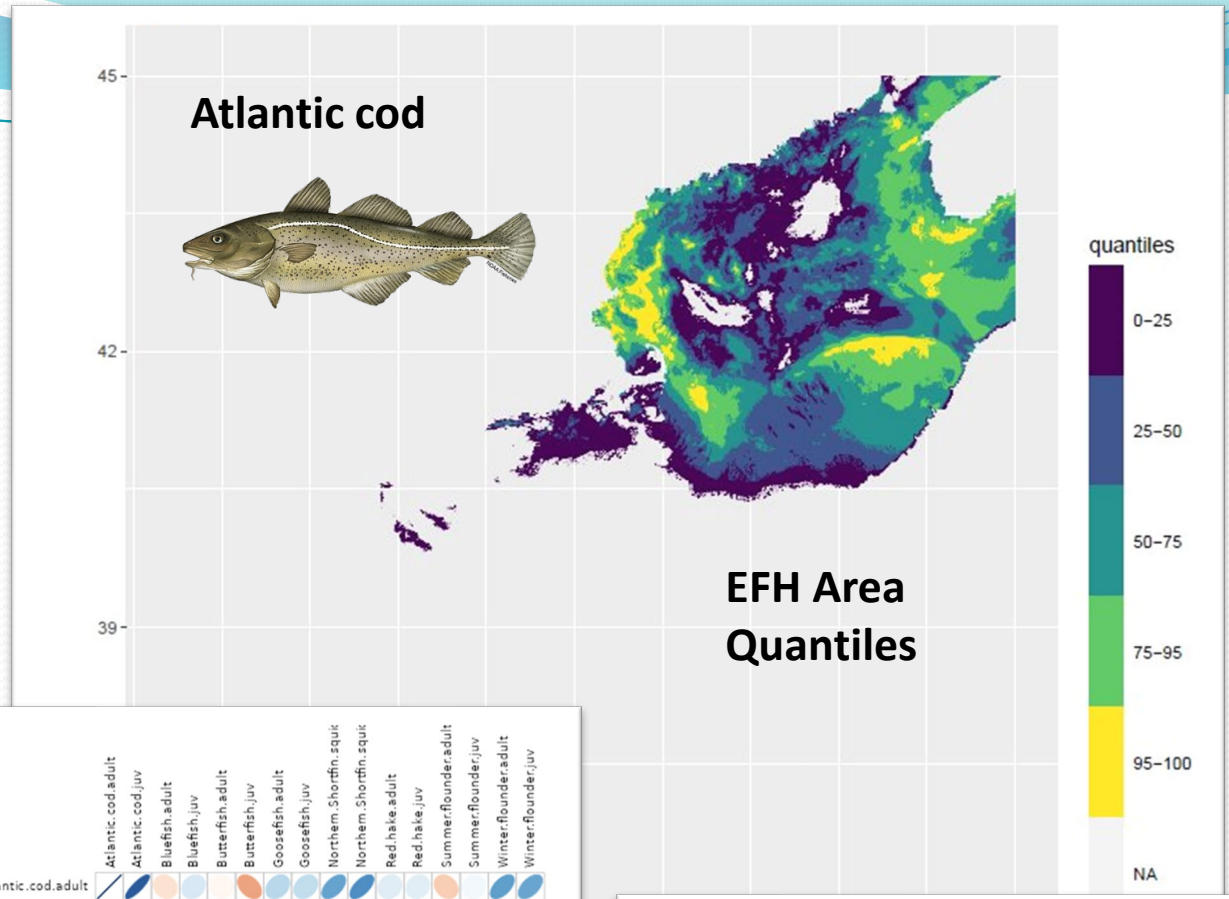
Planned text and map updates by species (2026)

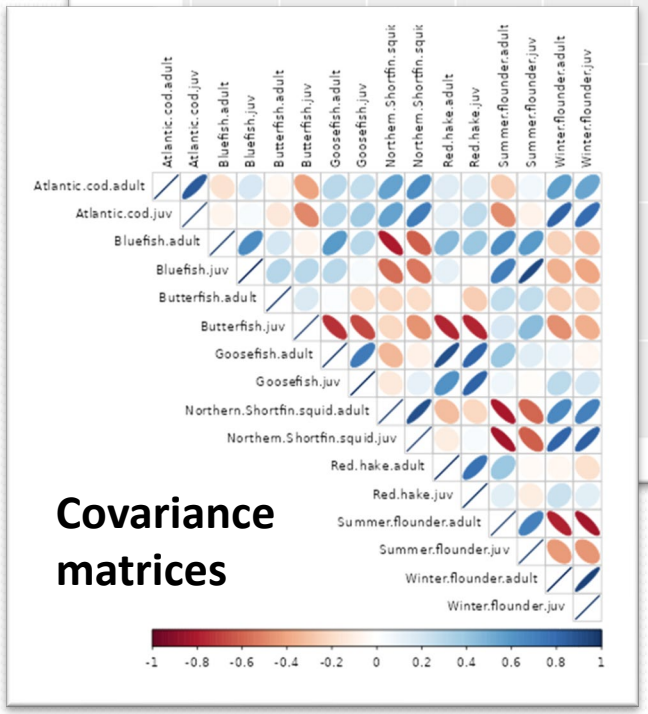
Species	Text updates	Map updates
Atlantic sea scallop	Egg, larvae, juvenile, adult	Model-based (dredge-trawl integration, compare to optical surveys) Separate juvenile & adult
Atlantic wolffish	Egg, larvae, juvenile, adult	Species-specific model (longline-trawl integration)
Atlantic halibut, Offshore hake, Pollock	Egg, larvae, juvenile, adult	Model-based (joint SDMs) Pooled* juvenile & adult
Acadian redfish, American plaice, Haddock, Ocean pout, Red hake, Silver hake, White hake, Windowpane flounder, Winter flounder, Witch flounder, Yellowtail flounder	Egg, larvae, juvenile, adult	Model-based (joint SDMs) Separate* juvenile & adult

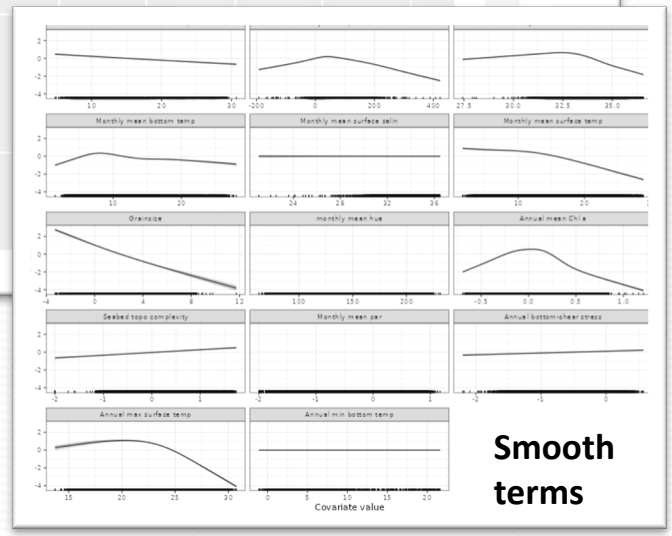
* Separate is the goal; ability to separate or pool may change as the models are finalized

Additional habitat information

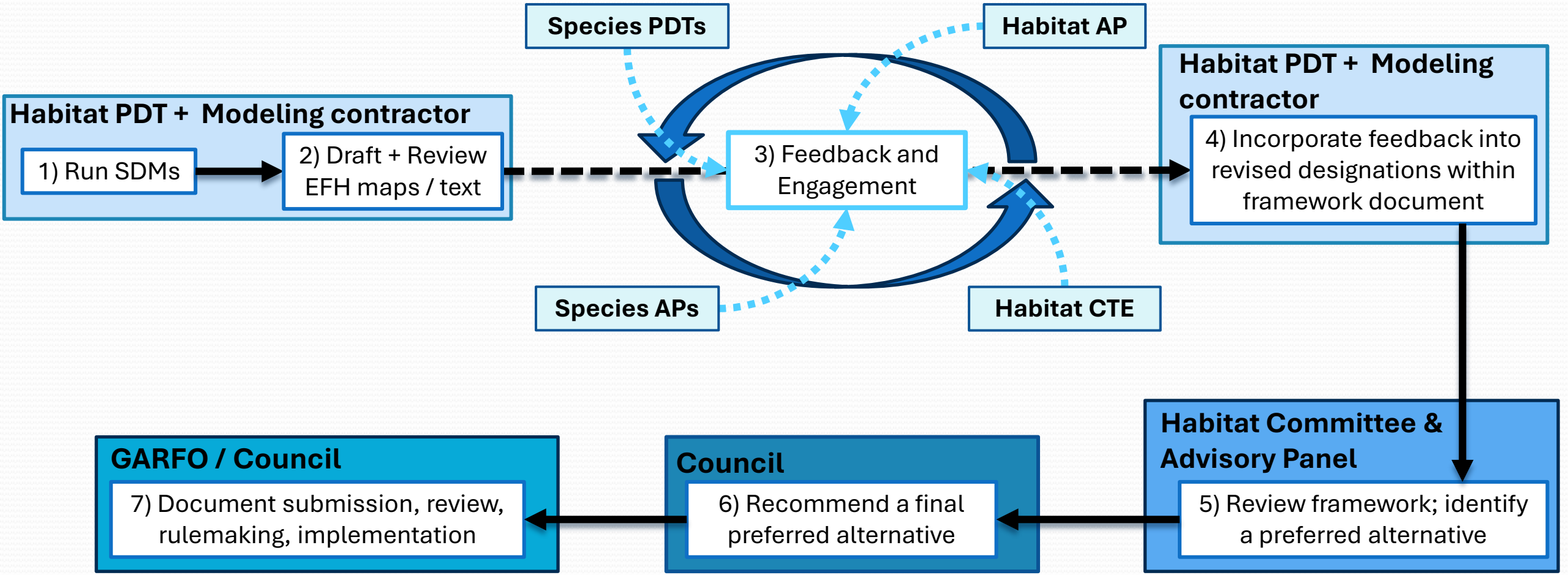
- For species with model-based EFH, we will share:
  - Quantile maps, showing the relative importance of different areas within EFH footprint
  - Smooth terms from models, showing the effects of variables on predicted species occurrence
  - Covariance matrices, showing the shared responses between species and life stages





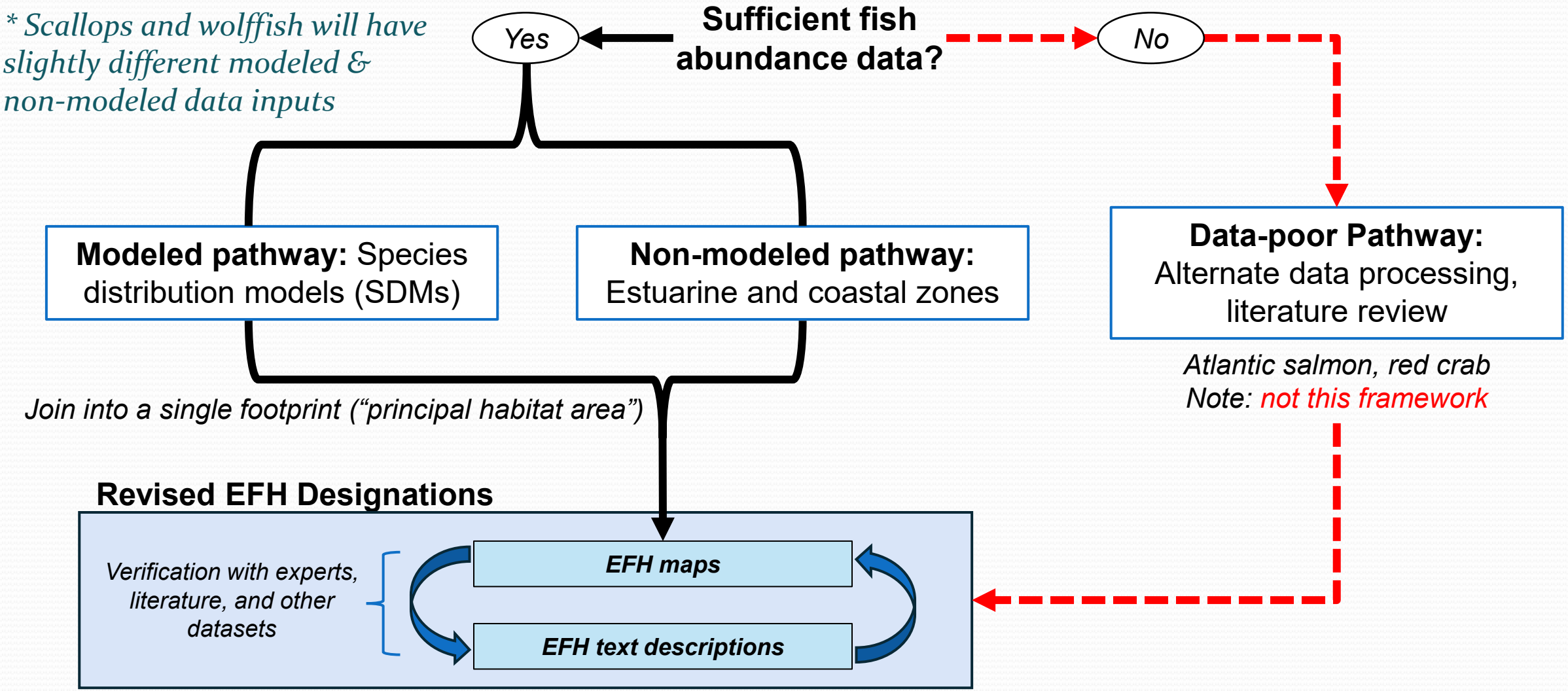


Workflow for EFH Framework



EFH Designation Methods Overview

** Scallops and wolffish will have slightly different modeled & non-modeled data inputs*



Feedback and Engagement

- Solicit input from species PDTs and APs on draft EFH designations (text and maps)
- Connect via Zoom / phone calls or via correspondence throughout the year
- Engage with individuals or in small group, can provide high-level overview to larger groups as needed
- Groundfish (12 species): plan to split species into subgroups for PDT feedback
  - Based on PDT expertise and availability; species life history similarities

Planned timeline

Timing Flexibility:

- *Final action could be pushed to Jan 2027, as needed (avoiding busy DEC mtg)*
- *Longer runway (FEB-NOV) for development/feedback*
- *Intend to include all 16 species, but can defer some to 2027 action as needed*

2025	
NOV-JAN	PDT and modeling contractor (Dr. Haak) finalize species distribution model runs for all species, including separate models for scallops and wolffish; conduct literature review to inform text descriptions (ongoing)
2026	
JAN	PDT drafts and reviews designations; develops draft alternatives
JAN	**Council initiates 2026 EFH Designation Framework**
FEB-AUG	Review draft EFH designations and alternatives with various groups: • Initial review with Hab AP, Cte • Feedback and engagement with species PDTs, APs
MAR	PDT drafts and reviews designations and develops draft alternatives for scallops and wolffish
AUG	PDT incorporates feedback into revised designations; completes framework document, NEPA analyses
AUG-SEP	Habitat Committee recommends preferred alternatives
SEP	**Council takes final action**
OCT	Preliminary submission of 2026 EFH Designation Framework
TBD	Final submission of 2026 EFH Designation Framework
TBD	Implementation of 2026 EFH Designation Framework

Today's Council action

- Formally initiate 2026 EFH Framework
- Consider a draft problem statement and objectives:

  Problem statement: During the EFH 5-year technical review completed in January 2025, the Council recognized the need to update EFH designations for its managed species based on recent species distribution and abundance data and species distribution model outputs. The current designations are based on data through 2005 and may not reflect current habitat use by Council-managed species.

  Objective: Revise EFH text descriptions and maps for all life history stages of Atlantic sea scallops, Acadian redfish, American plaice, Atlantic halibut, Atlantic wolffish, haddock, ocean pout, offshore hake, pollock, red hake, silver hake, white hake, windowpane flounder, winter flounder, witch flounder, and yellowtail flounder.