

Habitat Committee Report

7. *Habitat Committee (June 23-25, 2026)*

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MELISSA SMITH, HABITAT COMMITTEE CHAIR

JUNE 24, 2026
MYSTIC, CT



New England Fishery
Management Council

AGENDA

1. Receive a short update on work to date on the 2026 Essential Fish Habitat Framework to designate EFH for groundfish, small mesh species, and scallops, including plans for seeking and incorporating advisory panel, scientist, and other feedback into the designations prior to the September Council meeting
2. Review the scope of work, report structure, and information sources for the Surfclam Dredge Exemption Program Review, and provide feedback so that the report can be prepared before the September Council meeting
3. Review Committee recommendation on sunseting the Georges Bank and/or Stellwagen Dedicated Habitat Research Areas and provide a Council recommendation to the Regional Administrator



2026 ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT FRAMEWORK

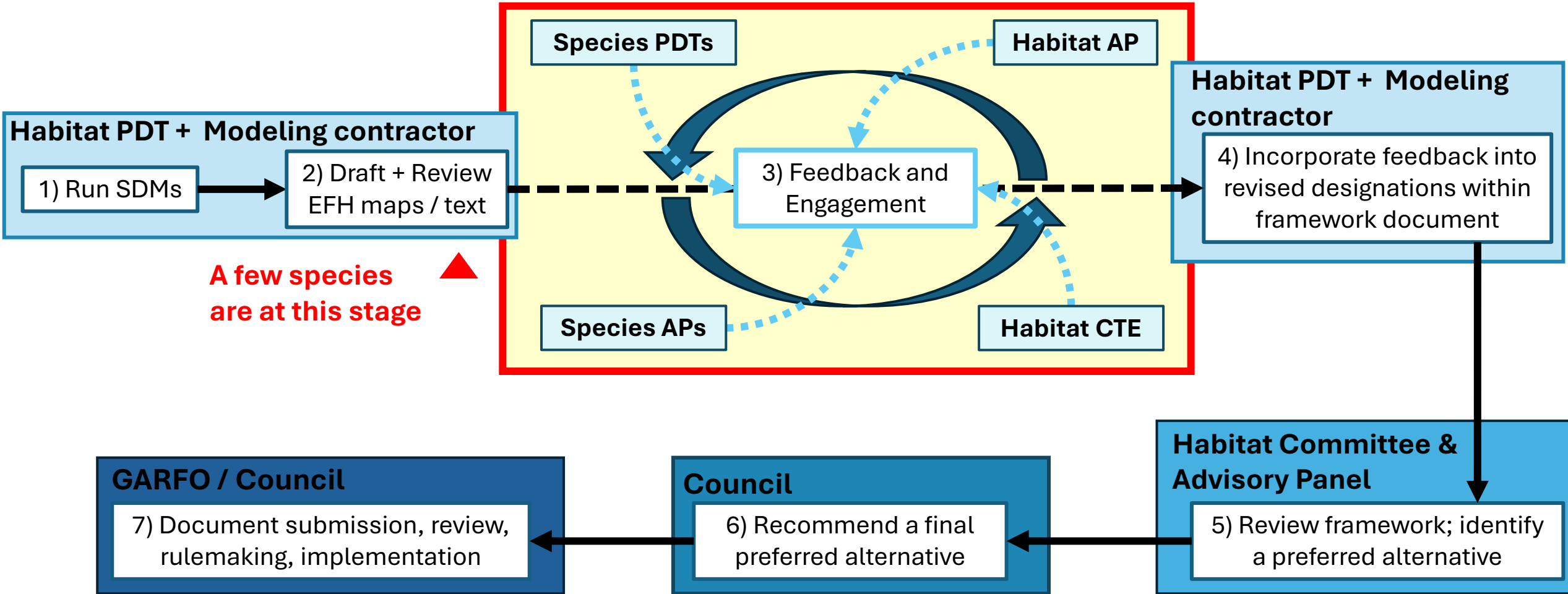
- Developing updated EFH designations for groundfish, small mesh multispecies, and scallops
- Designation maps and text drafted this spring based on species distribution models, inshore survey and environmental data, and literature review
- Currently reviewing with scientific and fishery experts and will continue to seek feedback
- Anticipate final review with AP and CTE in August or September, followed by final Council action in September



WORKFLOW FOR EFH FRAMEWORK

▼ We are currently here,
for most species

EFH Workflow



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PLANNED TEXT AND MAP UPDATES BY SPECIES (2026)

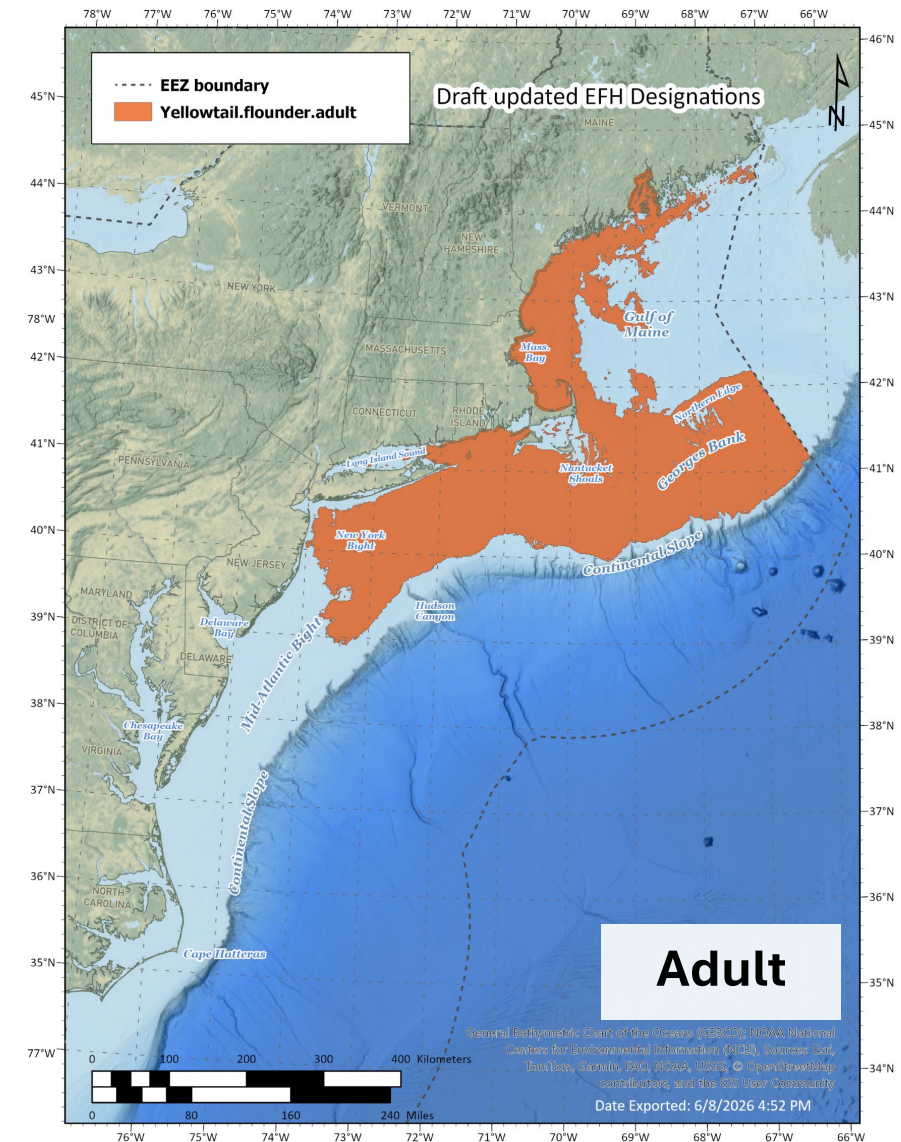
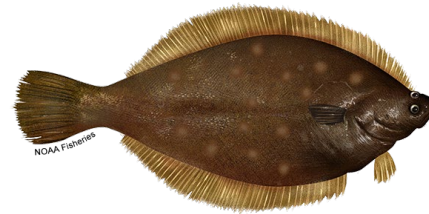
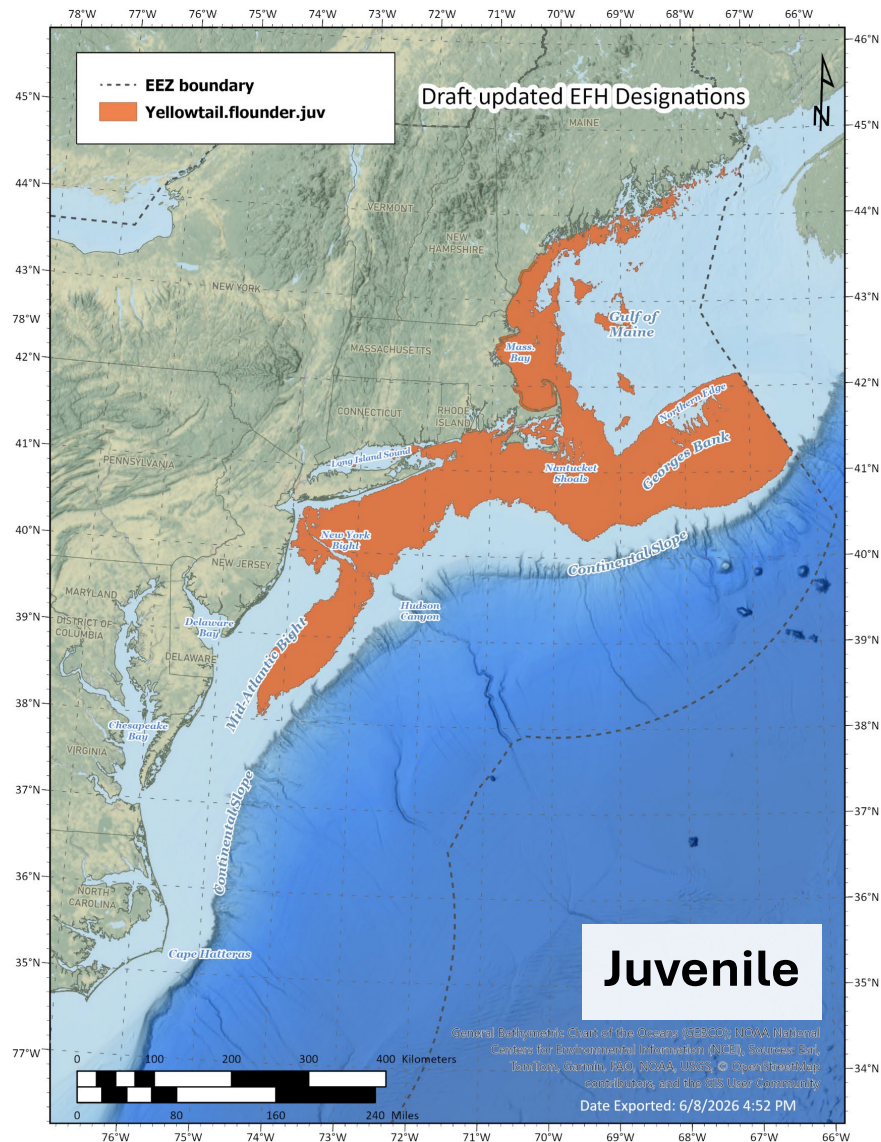
Species	Text updates	Map updates*
<i>Joint hurdle SDMs</i>		
Acadian redfish, American plaice, Atlantic halibut, Haddock, Ocean pout, Pollock*, Red hake, Silver hake, White hake, Windowpane flounder, Winter flounder, Witch flounder, Yellowtail flounder	Egg, larvae, juvenile, adult	<i>Model-based (joint hurdle SDM) Separate juvenile & adult (except halibut) > Pollock currently pooled, separate available shortly</i>
<i>Single index integrated SDM (dredge-trawl integration)</i>		
Atlantic sea scallop	Egg, larvae, juvenile, adult	<i>Model-based (dredge-trawl integration, compare to optical surveys) Separate juvenile & adult</i>
<i>Simplified, single-species SDM</i>		
Atlantic wolffish, offshore hake	Egg, larvae, juvenile, adult	<i>Model-based (longline-trawl integration) Pooled juvenile & adult</i>

* Separate is the goal; ability to separate or pool may change as the models are finalized (Halibut, Atlantic wolffish, offshore hake)



MAP EXAMPLE: YELLOWTAIL FLOUNDER

See Council Binder for additional draft EFH designations (maps and text, last updated 6/8/2026)



TEXT EXAMPLE: YELLOWTAIL JUVENILE



Essential fish habitat (EFH) for juvenile yellowtail flounder (TL < 24 cm) consists of the principal habitat area and includes subtidal benthic habitats in coastal and continental shelf waters in the Gulf of Maine, on Georges Bank, in southern New England, and extending into the Mid-Atlantic region; south of the New York Bight, EFH primarily occurs in outer shelf waters but not to the continental slope (Map 26). Where applicable, inshore and nearshore juvenile EFH typically includes the marine zones of coastal areas, bays, and estuaries; specific portions of these areas can be identified from Map 26. Within the principal habitat area, juvenile EFH ranges from 7-159 meters depth, but juveniles most commonly occur between 24-81 meters depth (Appendix B, Table 14). Juvenile EFH also includes bottom temperatures between 3-15°C and marine waters between 31-34 ppt (Appendix B, Table 14). EFH for juvenile yellowtail flounder occurs on sand and muddy sand; in the Mid-Atlantic, young-of-the-year juveniles settle to the bottom on the continental shelf.

Life stage(s), size breaks, and modeling information (if applicable).

Description of designated geographic range

Inshore and offshore habitat and substrate type (preferred types if available), including salinity zone(s) of inshore areas

Habitat characteristics (depth, temperature, salinity) of principal habitat area, including preferred ranges, if available

Relevant life history information (i.e., seasonal movements, spawning activity, etc.)

Adults: Spawning information, if known (literature, outreach)

FEEDBACK AND ENGAGEMENT

- **Format** = species EFH primers (PDFs), ~3 pages each
 - Include discussion questions (next slide) + draft maps and text for each life stage
 - Can share other products as relevant (e.g., R Shiny EFH App, ancillary model outputs, etc.)
- **Target audience** = species PDT, AP members
 - Individually, in small groups, or wholly
 - Zoom meetings, correspondence, etc.
- **Groundfish subgroups** – *leverage availability + expertise*
 - *Group A – Offshore:* Acadian redfish, haddock, pollock
 - *Group B – Rocky longline:* Atlantic halibut, Atlantic wolffish, ocean pout, white hake
 - *Group C – Flatfish:* American plaice, windowpane, winter flounder, witch flounder, yellowtail



FEEDBACK AND ENGAGEMENT

- **Discussion questions** – *identify gaps in maps, text, or information sources:*
 - Is the draft map representative of the life stage's distribution throughout the year? Are there any areas missing? Are there any areas that should be removed?
 - Does the text capture other notable life history traits that influence habitat use, especially spawning information, seasonal differences/migrations, or regional variation?
 - Does the text capture preferred habitat characteristics and types?
 - Are there other individuals, datasets, or sources of information we should engage with?
- **Expectations:**
 - Not looking to make major changes to modeling inputs or methods
 - Adjustments to maps can be considered if well-supported (data, literature, etc.), but aiming to remain relatively consistent in approach across all species
 - Species with less info may be less detailed in the text descriptions
 - Additional datasets can be considered to groundtruth maps and text descriptions
 - Exploring options to groundtruth EFH maps with commercial catch footprints by species



FEEDBACK AND ENGAGEMENT - TIMING

**Additional feedback can be provided via correspondence or follow-up conversations*

FMP	Group / species	May	June	July	Aug	Sept
Northeast multispecies	Group A – redfish, haddock, pollock	Maps / text ready for feedback				
Northeast multispecies	Group C – flatfish (5)	Maps / text ready for feedback				
Small-mesh multispecies	Red hake, silver hake	Maps / text ready for feedback				
Northeast multispecies	Group B – halibut, wolffish*, ocean pout, white hake		Simplified SDMs in progress (halibut, wolffish)			
Small-mesh multispecies	Offshore hake*		Simplified SDMs in progress			
Scallops	Atlantic sea scallops		Single-index SDMs in progress			
Habitat PDT			6/17 - Updates			
Habitat Advisory Panel		5/29 – Initial Review			Recommend preferred alternatives	
Habitat Committee			6/12 – Initial Review			
Council			Update			Final action



COUNCIL DISCUSSION – 2026 EFH FRAMEWORK

- Do you have questions about the framework development process or EFH designation methods?
- Do you have specific suggestions for groups or individuals we should talk to about the draft designations?
- Do you have any comments on specific designations that were shared before this meeting?

Please contact Julian Garrison or Michelle Bachman to offer feedback

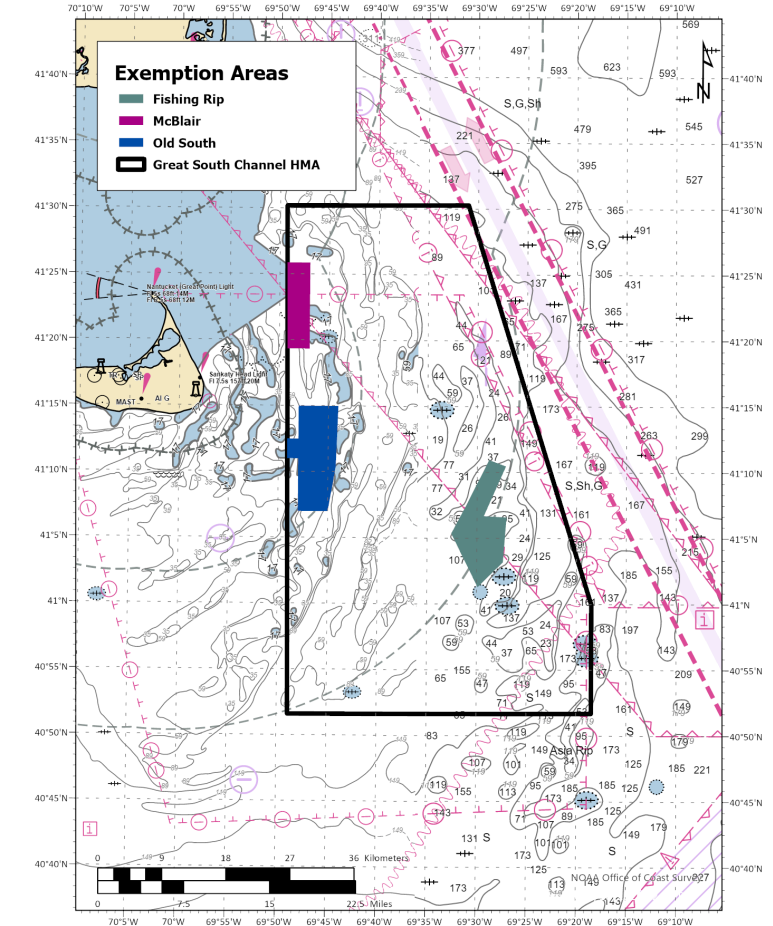
jgarrison@nefmc.org or mbachman@nefmc.org



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SURFCLAM DREDGE EXEMPTION PROGRAM REVIEW

- Requested by the Council
- Purpose of the review is to evaluate the surfclam fishery that has been occurring in the three dredge exemption areas within the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area since 2020
- Consider habitat conservation and fishery performance relative to objectives set in OHA2 and Clam Dredge Framework
- The report will be completed prior to the September Council meeting to support an initial 2027 work priorities discussion



WHAT IS WITHIN AND BEYOND THE SCOPE OF THE REVIEW?

- **Objective: Assess the effectiveness of three surfclam exemption areas from both habitat conservation and fishery perspectives, considering recent data and information**
- Will not explicitly evaluate the effectiveness of the two research areas nor the habitat or surfclam resource conditions in portions of the HMA outside of the three exemption areas
- Will consider research results to the extent that they inform our understanding of the relationship between habitat conditions and clam dredging.
 - This includes EFP-based research done by Coonamessett Farm Foundation



Council priority for 2026: Develop an “evaluation of the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area surfclam exemption areas”



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE REVIEW

Habitat / Managed Species

- ❖ Is the exemption program minimizing, to the extent practicable, the effects of fishing on essential fish habitats in the Great South Channel HMA?

Surfclam Fishery

- ❖ Is the exemption program effective in creating fishing opportunities and supporting achievement of optimum yield in the surfclam fishery?



INFORMATION AND ANALYSES RELATED TO HABITAT AND MANAGED SPECIES

1. **Habitat conditions:** Sediment, depth, natural disturbance, epifauna, temperature, change through time – *Optical & remotely sensed data*
2. **Species-specific habitat usage:** Environmental drivers, change through time and differences across seasons – *Species distribution models*
3. **Atlantic cod spawning:** Any recent data on distribution of spawning cod, or the area's suitability as spawning habitat – *Acoustic surveys, environmental data*
4. **Effects of fishing gear:** Updated estimates of disturbance – *Fishing Effects model*
5. **Surfclam resource conditions:** Distribution, size composition, changes through time – *Surfclam resource surveys*



INFORMATION AND ANALYSES RELATED TO SURFCLAM EXEMPTION AREA FISHERY

1. **Effort, landings, revenues** – *CAMS database, paired with VMS*
 - a. Exemption areas, comparing the time periods pre- and post-implementation of the program
 - b. Research areas, for context
2. **Fleet characterization:** Number of vessels, landing ports, home ports, comparing time periods pre- and post- implementation – *CAMS database*
3. **Overall surfclam fishery trends:** Provide context for data from the exemption program - *MAFMC Fishery Performance Report*
4. **Information from surfclam industry members**



COMMITTEE DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Committee consensus:

That the Habitat Committee supports the Habitat Advisory Panel's and staff's recommendations for elements to include in the Clam Exemption Program review, and that there be flexibility to include other information as time allows and to focus the analysis as needed.

The Committee...

- Agreed that the review is intended to support the Council's priorities discussion later this year and that the level of detail should reflect this purpose,
- Recognized there may be limits to the depth of analysis in the report due to time constraints, and
- Encouraged collaboration with scientists and industry members during development of the report.



ADVISORY PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS ON SCOPE AND INFORMATION TO BE CONSIDERED

- a) Expand the scope to include habitat and surfclam resource conditions in portions of the GSC HMA outside the McBlair, Old South, and Fishing Rip exemption areas.
- b) Examine the science supporting the original GSC HMA designation in OHA2, including whether the productivity rationale advanced for protection of complex benthic habitat important for juvenile cod and other groundfish has been borne out by evidence developed since 2018.
- c) Treat the natural disturbance regime of the GSC as a central analytical input, including an assessment of whether gear impact recovery times on this seabed are shorter than, comparable to, or longer than the natural disturbance return interval.
- d) Incorporate the CFF multibeam sonar, drop camera, and compensation fishing research outputs as primary data on habitat condition and recovery, rather than as contextual background.
- e) Examine updated cod spawning timing and location evidence relative to the boundaries and seasonal structure of the existing exemption areas.

- *GSC HMA – Great South Channel Habitat Management Area*
- *OHA2 – Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2*
- *CFF – Coonamessett Farm Foundation*



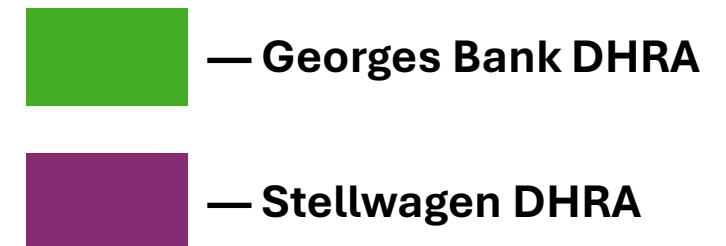
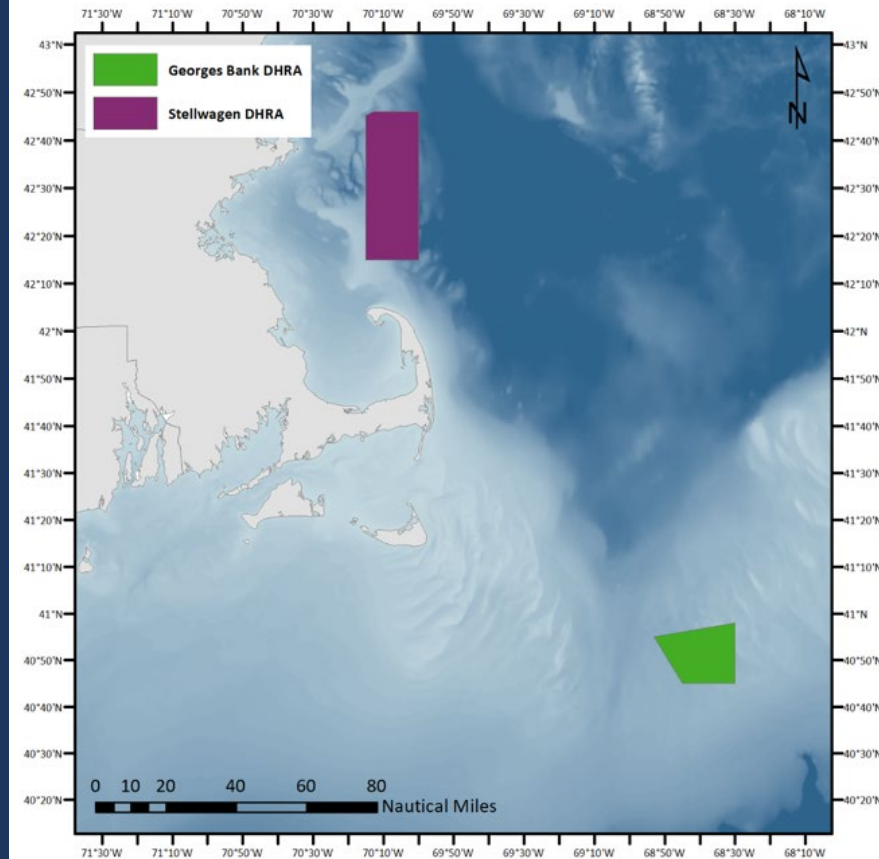
COUNCIL DISCUSSION – CLAM EXEMPTION PROGRAM REVIEW

- Consider scope of review and information inputs, including Committee recommendations
 - Is there any other information we should be considering?
- Staff objective is to provide a report for September
 - Following Council review, limited additional analyses could be prepared upon request within the scope of this year's priority task
 - Other more extensive analyses would need to be included in a management action to rework the exemption program, if prioritized by the Council



DEDICATED HABITAT RESEARCH AREA SUNSET REVIEW

- Pertains to Stellwagen and Georges Bank DHRAs
- Council requested to provide a recommendation to the Regional Administrator, who has the authority to administratively remove a designation
- Criteria for continuation are whether research related to DHRA objectives has occurred, is ongoing, or is planned
- Information provided: report from GARFO on federally reviewed, permitted, or authorized activities; PDT, AP, and CTE recommendations



WHAT IS A DEDICATED HABITAT RESEARCH AREA (DHRA)?

- A designated location where certain fishing activities are restricted to create controlled conditions where research on specific topics can be conducted

Research in DHRA should...

- Test assumptions of fishing effects modeling including:
 - Differential habitat susceptibility and recovery by gear type;
 - Improved estimates of gear contact w/seabed;
 - Habitat recovery models, patch size effects, and effort-response issues;
 - Differences between natural and fishing disturbance.
- Improve our understanding of how habitats support managed species, **especially the relationships between scallop distribution, abundance, growth, and seabed type***.

* Georges Bank DHRA only



See Document 3, 2022 GARFO report to the Council for full wording of questions



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WHAT FISHING ACTIVITIES ARE PROHIBITED IN A DHRA?

	Stellwagen DHRA:	Georges Bank DHRA:
Prohibited due to DHRA regulations	Bottom trawls and dredges, sink gillnets, bottom longlines	Bottom trawls and dredges
Overlapping management area fishing restrictions	<u>Western Gulf of Maine Habitat Closure Area</u>: Prohibits bottom trawls and dredges <u>Western Gulf of Maine Groundfish Closure Area</u>: Closed to all fishing vessels except for charter and party with LOA*; exempted gears**, midwater trawl exempted fishery, purse seine exempted fishery, transiting vessels with stowed gear	<u>Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning Closure Area</u>: Prohibits surfclam and quahog fishing unless in a designated exemption area and following a testing protocol***
If the DHRA sunsets?	No change in fishing gears allowed or prohibited, given other overlapping management areas	Fishing could resume in DHRA, except for clam dredging***

* *Letter of Authorization*

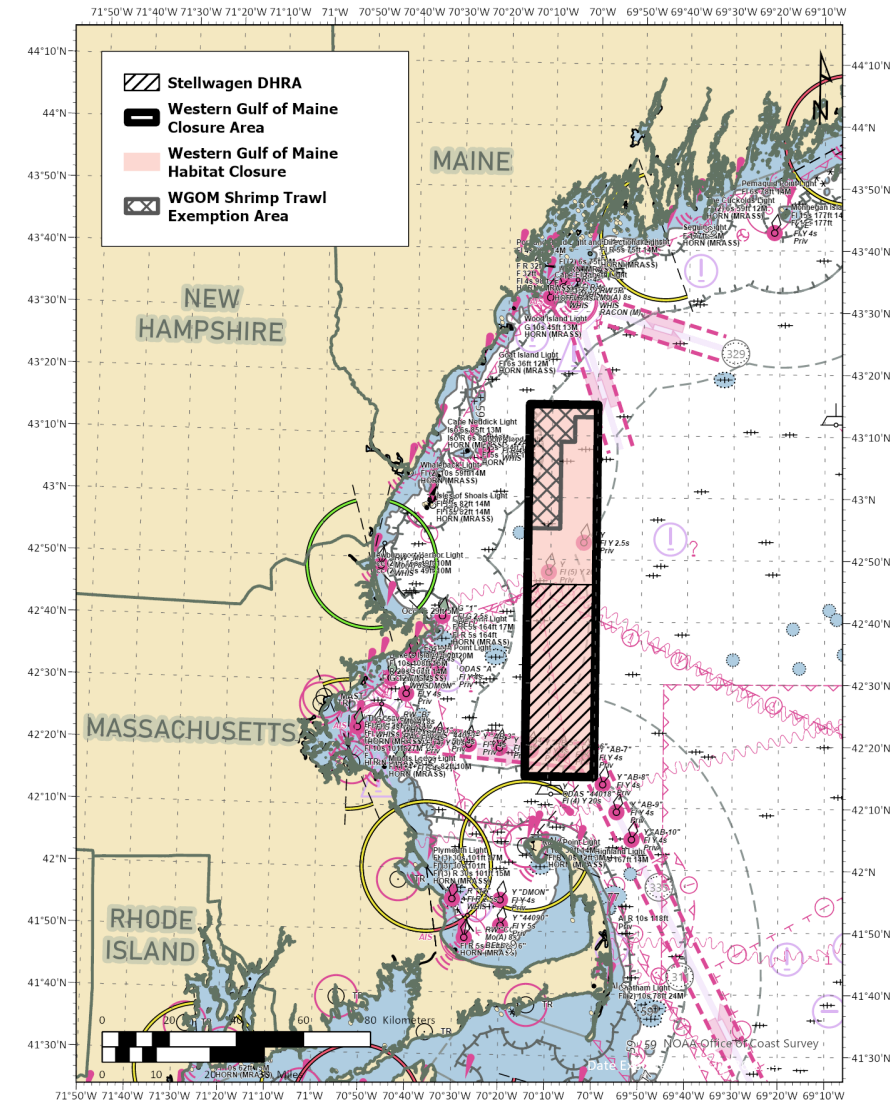
** *Exempted gears: Pelagic hook and line, pelagic longline, spears, rakes, diving gear, cast nests, tongs, harpoons, weirs, dipnets, pots and traps, shrimp trawls with grate, surfclam and ocean quahog dredges*

****This program may change in the future under the EPA/NOAA Biotoxin Monitoring Program*

DHRAS OVERLAP OTHER MANAGEMENT AREAS

Each area type has different objectives and gear restrictions:

Area Type	Objectives	Gears Restricted
Dedicated Habitat Research Area	Facilitate coordinated research on gear impacts, habitat recovery, natural disturbance, and productivity	Gears with adverse impacts, and for Stellwagen, gears that remove groundfish
Habitat Management Area	Minimize impacts of fishing on essential fish habitat to the extent practicable	Mobile bottom tending gears (greatest adverse effects on seafloor habitats)
Year-Round Groundfish Closure Area	Promote rebuilding and prevent overfishing on groundfish stocks	Gears capable of catching groundfish



Note: Although the Northern shrimp fishery has been closed in recent years, OHA2 authorized shrimp trawling in the cross hatched area



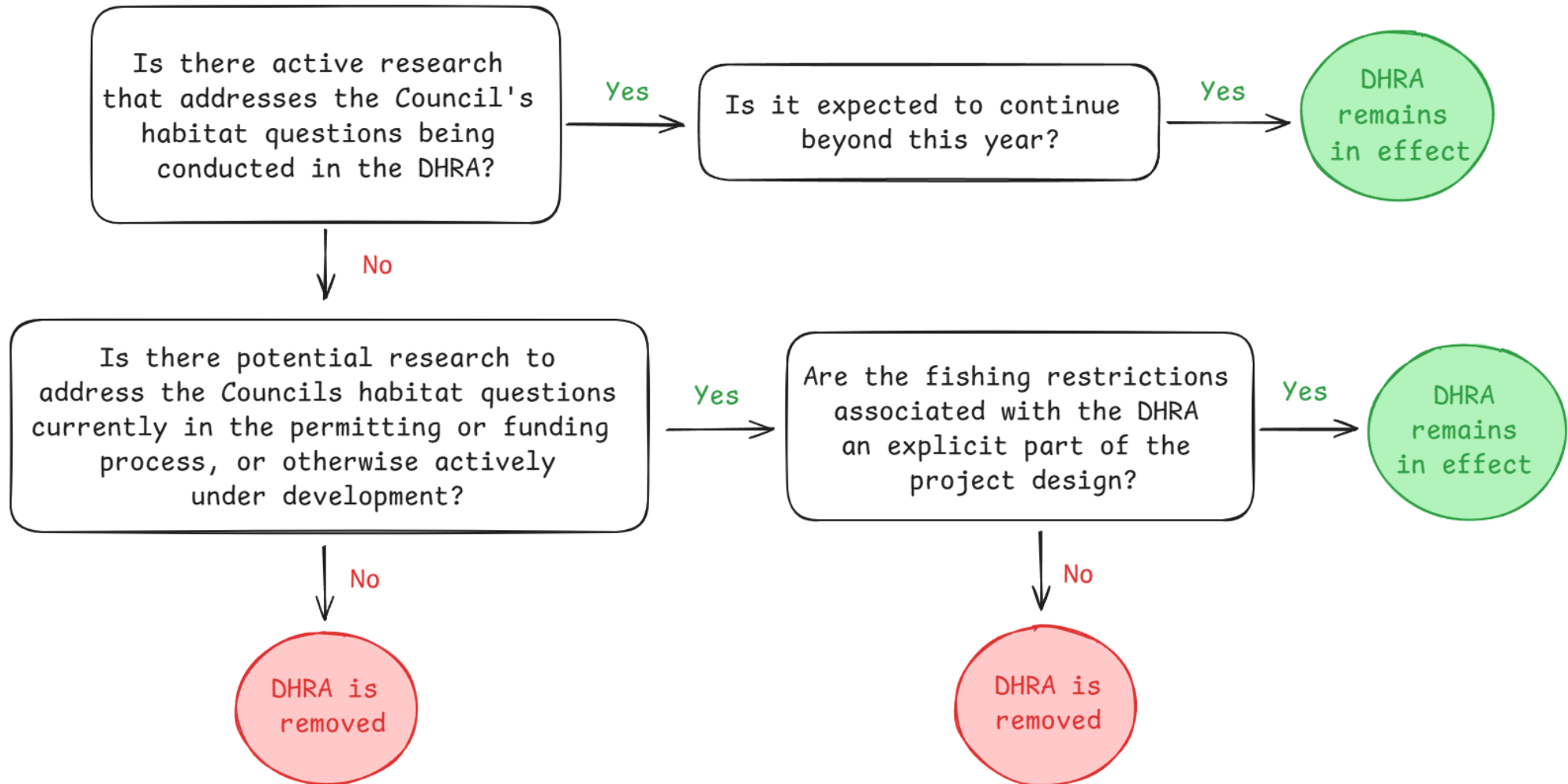
RATIONALE FOR THE SUNSET PROVISION

- The Council can designate DHRAs and enact fishing restrictions within them, and set research priorities, but it does not directly conduct or fund research activities.
- The sunset provision was developed in response to concerns that DHRAs might be designated but remain unused, thereby causing economic hardship to the fishing industry without improving habitat science.
- Allowing for research activities to be in the planning stage but not yet on the water at the three-year mark acknowledges the fact that proposal development, submission, review, and allocation of funds can be a lengthy process.
- Note: DHRAs as potentially short-term areas are not considered part of the Council's approach to minimizing adverse effects of fishing on EFH



CRITERIA FOR MAINTAINING A DHRA DESIGNATION

- The sunset provision allows the Council to recommend DHRA removal if research projects addressing the Council's questions and reliant on the DHRA regulations are not occurring



FINDINGS OF REVIEW

- Stellwagen DHRA
 - Recent, ongoing, and future work that is related to DHRA questions and reliant on regulations – see *next slide for list*
 - Indicates retention, per flowchart
- Georges Bank DHRA
 - Lack of recent or planned work related to DHRA questions
 - Indicates removal, per flowchart



STELLWAGEN RESEARCH RELATED TO DHRA OBJECTIVES

- Recent/ongoing work
 - Video analysis of patterns and process of natural disturbances and species presence across habitats - *2023-2025, with possible continuation in future*
 - Passive acoustic monitoring to understand human, environmental, and biotic soundscape - *2023-present*
 - Environmental DNA study to compare whole ecosystem biodiversity inside and outside of the DHRA - *fieldwork 2021, published 2025*
- Future planned work
 - Autonomous underwater vehicle survey to compare habitat quality and species composition between areas inside and outside of the Stellwagen DHRA
 - Economic analysis of commercial fishing and ecotourism operations in adjacent areas to identify any “spillover” effect from increased catchable biomass



COMMITTEE RECOMMENDS SUNSETTING THE GEORGES BANK DHRA AND CONSIDERING DEPENDENCE OF STELLWAGEN RESEARCH ON DHRA REGULATIONS

1. Recommend that the Council request administrative removal of the Dedicated Habitat Research Area designation on Georges Bank

Carried by unanimous consent, with abstention of GARFO

2. That the Habitat Committee requests that GARFO and the Habitat PDT complete the dependence analysis required by the OHA2 review framework for the Stellwagen Bank Dedicated Habitat Research Area before the Council makes any retention or sunset recommendation to the Regional Administrator.

Carried on a roll call vote (7/1/1) with abstention of GARFO

- The AP made the same recommendations as the Committee.
- The PDT recommended retaining the Stellwagen DHRA.
- The PDT recommended carefully considering tradeoffs around whether to remove the Georges Bank DHRA given the long-standing management regime.



DEPENDENCE OF RESEARCH IN THE STELLWAGEN AREA ON DHRA REGULATIONS

- OHA2 DHRA evaluation flowchart: “Are the fishing restrictions associated with the DRHA designation an explicit part of the design of the project?” (FEIS Volume 3, p. 117) → **Yes**
- OHA2 established or reaffirmed separate but overlapping management areas with different objectives
- The Habitat and Groundfish Closures combined, but not separately, provide the same restrictions as the DHRA
 - The groundfish area restricts bottom trawls, scallop dredges, sink gillnets, and bottom longlines, but allows clam dredging as an exempted gear
 - The habitat area restricts bottom trawls and dredges, but not fixed gears
- Per OHA2, Council intent is to review all spatial management areas in ~2028



COUNCIL ACTION FOR TODAY

1. Recommend whether to sunset the Georges Bank DHRA, given results of the review and the PDT, AP, and CTE recommendations
2. Recommend whether to sunset the Stellwagen DHRA, given results of the review, dependence discussion, and the PDT, AP, and CTE recommendations

