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New England Fishery Management Council

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

July 28, 2026

Mr. Michael Pentony
Regional Administrator
NOAA Fishery Service
Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office
55 Great Republic Drive
Gloucester, MA 01930

Re: Increasing efficiency of the scallop fishery by allowing combined trips for scallops and tilefish

Dear Mike:

The New England Fishery Management Council (Council) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the exempted fishing permit (EFP) application submitted by Scallop Shack Farms, LLC. The proposed EFP would allow a Limited Access General Category (LAGC) IFQ scallop vessel to retain and land tilefish while fishing on declared scallop trips in the Southern New England and Georges Bank Scallop Dredge Fishery Exemption Areas. The EFP is limited in scope, involving a single vessel and up to 33 trips for a total of 66-132 days. The Council notes that this EFP aligns with directives of Executive Order 14276, "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness," by providing regulatory relief to combine fishing trips that would otherwise occur separately.

The application highlights several operational and monitoring issues that may warrant consideration, especially if the project is successful at meeting its objectives, and there is a desire to allow combined-gear trips for the entire fishery. The letter focuses on potential impacts to scallop fishing and does not specifically weigh in on any potential impacts to the tilefish fishery, which is managed by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council.

First, the Council requests that GARFO consider how catch and effort data generated during these trips will be incorporated into existing reporting and monitoring programs. For example, the proposed trips would involve the use of both scallop dredge gear and bottom longline gear during a single fishing trip. While current electronic vessel trip reporting (eVTR) systems are capable of recording multiple fishing events where multiple gear types are used within a single eVTR, the Council encourages GARFO and the Northeast Fisheries Science Center to evaluate whether existing systems adequately capture catch and effort information for this type of mixed-gear activity and whether any additional reporting requirements may be necessary. This type of resolution is needed to continue to reliably monitor the scallop fishery, such as accurate estimation of Landings per Unit Effort (LPUE).

Second, the Council notes potential vessel monitoring system (VMS) and enforcement considerations associated with combined-gear trips. In particular, current VMS declarations do not sufficiently distinguish when different gear types are being deployed during a trip, which can

pose challenges for enforcement. As GARFO evaluates this EFP, the Council encourages consideration of whether additional reporting requirements or new VMS declaration codes may be necessary to ensure that vessel activity can be appropriately interpreted and documented for compliance and enforcement.

Finally, the Council requests that GARFO consider observer coverage and monitoring implications associated with these mixed-gear, combined scallop and tilefish trips that are anticipated to last up to four days. Specifically, the Council is interested in understanding whether the existing Industry-Funded Scallop (IFS) observer program is fully equipped to accommodate this type of mixed-gear trip, including any implications for the training and deployment of observers trained on both dredge and longline gear. As trips up to four days exceed the length of a typical LAGC IFQ scallop trip, explicit consideration of the impacts on observer compensation and available set-aside pounds is suggested. If observer coverage would only be required for the portion of the trip where scallop dredge gear would be employed, this should be clarified and considered when assessing observer compensation and available set-aside pounds.

The Council appreciates GARFO's consideration of these issues and looks forward to reviewing any information generated through this project regarding the operational efficiencies and monitoring implications of combined scallop and tilefish trips.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Cate O'Keefe".

Cate O'Keefe
Executive Director

CC: Dr. Chris Moore, MAFMC