



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: August 13, 2026
TO: Habitat Committee, Habitat Advisory Panel
FROM: Melissa Smith, Habitat Committee Chair
SUBJECT: Charge for Joint Habitat CTE-AP meeting on August 20, 2026

The purpose of this memo is to help prepare the Habitat Committee and Habitat Advisory Panel (AP) for their meeting on August 20, 2026, from 9:00 – 3:30.

MEETING PURPOSE. The purpose of the meeting is to: (1) review the draft 2026 Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Framework, including EFH designation alternatives, and identify a preferred alternative for Council consideration at the September 15-17 meeting, (2) review a draft PDT report on the clam dredge exemption program within the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area, and (3) discuss other business, as necessary.

MEETING MATERIALS. To make the most of our meeting time, please familiarize yourself with the documents beforehand and come ready to make any recommendations. As documents become available, they will be posted on the Council webpage: <https://www.nefmc.org/calendar/aug-20-2026-habitat-joint-committee-and-advisory-panel-meeting>. Documents are also listed at the end of this memo.

WEBINAR REGISTRATION. <https://nefmc-org.zoom.us/meeting/register/JPkr4NWtT9OLGt8OYpjZzQ>. To be able to view the webinar, listen, and talk during it, you must: 1) register for the webinar in advance and 2) join the webinar on the day of the meeting (you can then select phone or computer for your audio connection). For the best audio and visual experience, your Zoom desktop application must be updated prior to the meeting. Please join the webinar ten minutes prior to test audio and help the meeting start on time.

QUESTIONS/TECHNICAL SUPPORT. If you have any questions about the meeting documents, agenda, or how to participate, please contact Michelle Bachman (mbachman@nefmc.org; 978-465-0492 x 120). Staff would be happy to set up a practice webinar for you ahead of the meeting if that would be helpful.

2026 Essential Fish Habitat Framework

Initiated during the January 2026 Council meeting, this framework considers updated EFH designations for all life stages of Acadian redfish, American plaice, Atlantic halibut, Atlantic sea scallop, Atlantic wolffish, haddock, ocean pout, offshore hake, pollock, red hake, silver hake, white hake, windowpane flounder, winter flounder, witch flounder, and yellowtail flounder (sixteen species in total). The methods used to develop both the draft EFH map and text definitions build upon those developed as part of the EFH 5-Year Review, which was endorsed by the Council in January 2025. The framework includes a no action alternative, which is the existing Omnibus EFH Amendment 2 designations for all sixteen species, and an action alternative, which updates all EFH designations (maps and text descriptions).

EFH designation maps are based on predictive outputs from species distribution models (SDMs), combined with inshore occurrence data. Modeling and mapping methods vary somewhat across species depending on the amount and type of data available. For Acadian redfish, American plaice, haddock, ocean pout, pollock, red hake, silver hake, white hake, windowpane flounder, winter flounder, witch flounder, and yellowtail flounder, modeling and mapping approaches are the same as for the 2025 EFH framework, which updated designations for Atlantic cod, Atlantic herring, monkfish, and the seven skate complex species. Atlantic halibut, Atlantic wolffish, and offshore hake are considered relatively data-poor species and were modeled individually vs. in the joint model with other species. In addition to trawl survey data, longline survey data are used in the models for adult halibut and adult wolffish. For Atlantic sea scallop, a separate species distribution model that incorporated multiple dredge surveys and bottom trawl data was used and considered the different catchability of scallops in each survey. In addition to the draft framework, the meeting materials include ancillary maps and figures for each species (Appendix D) and an updated version of the designation methods document that was included with the 2025 EFH Framework (Appendix E). Specifically, Appendix E to the 2026 EFH Framework includes updated descriptions of methods to designate inshore and continental slope areas, both of which generally extend beyond the spatial domain of the offshore trawl surveys, as well as descriptions of the separate SDMs used for Atlantic halibut, Atlantic sea scallop, Atlantic wolffish, and offshore hake.

Staff will share each of the updated EFH designations, summarize feedback received during discussions with species PDT members, Council staff, and other outside experts such as stock assessment authors, and highlight any manual adjustments recommended for the maps and text descriptions. The presentation will identify any specific issues that would benefit from Committee and Advisory Panel input. Committee and Advisory Panel members are welcome to ask questions about the methods and make recommendations to improve the maps and text based on their knowledge of the species' habitat use. Following the meeting and prior to final Council action, ad-hoc changes to maps can be considered if well-supported by data and/or published literature. These recommendations will be considered by the Plan Development Team and can be incorporated into the draft maps and text for Council review, as appropriate. Changes to the models or inclusion of new datasets cannot be considered given timing constraints, but may be considered for the next EFH 5-Year Review. The main objective of this section of the meeting is to recommend a preferred alternative to the Council for final action in September, either the No Action designations implemented in 2018 or the revised designations.

Surfclam Exemption Program Review

In December 2025, the Council requested an evaluation of the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (HMA) Surfclam Exemption Program. The objective of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of surfclam exemption areas in the HMA from both habitat conservation and fishery perspectives, considering recent data and information.

The Advisory Panel, Committee, and Council reviewed an outline of the report during their May and June meetings. In June, the Council endorsed the Habitat Advisory Panel and staff recommendations for elements to include in the review and indicated that there should be flexibility to include other information as time allows and to focus the analysis as needed. Staff worked with the PDT during July and August to prepare the first draft of the report. The report does 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, but it considers the results of work conducted in the research areas. In addition to the draft exemption program report, the meeting materials include a copy of the final report on a recently completed research project.

Staff will provide an overview of the work to date and seek Advisory Panel and Committee feedback on additional information or analyses that would be helpful to include in the report as well as ways to more

clearly present the information where needed. Staff will continue to revise the report following this meeting and an updated version of the report will be presented to the Council in September. Some analyses may not be possible given information presently available or due to time constraints. Other analyses might be more appropriate for a future Council action related to the exemption program.

The Council will not modify the surfclam exemption program in 2026; 2026 work is focused solely on the evaluation of the exemption program, and any proposed changes to the exemption program (including exemption and research areas, seasonal measures, operational adjustments, or other measures) could be considered as a future Council work priority. While a detailed discussion of 2027 work priorities is not planned for this meeting, the Advisory Panel and Committee can offer recommendations for potential next steps the Council may wish to consider for the Surfclam Exemption Program, based on the PDT report.

Ocean Planning

Staff will provide a brief update on Ocean Planning activities at the beginning of the meeting. Members are encouraged to ask questions or share information during this agenda item so that the Council can continue to provide relevant comments and expertise related to these issues.

Meeting Documents

Meeting Notice

Meeting Agenda

1. Memo from Habitat Committee Chair, August 13, 2026 (this document)
2. Council staff presentation
3. Meeting Summaries
 - a. Habitat Plan Development Team, August 13, 2026 - draft
 - b. Habitat Plan Development Team, August 4, 2026
 - c. Habitat Plan Development Team, June 17, 2026
 - d. Habitat Committee, June 12, 2026
 - e. Habitat Advisory Panel, May 29, 2026
4. Draft 2026 Essential Fish Habitat Framework, with appendices
 - a. Draft 2026 EFH Framework document, with Appendices A-C
 - b. Draft Appendix D to the 2026 EFH Framework – Ancillary Maps and Figures
 - c. Draft Appendix E to the 2026 EFH Framework – EFH Designation Methods
5. Draft Great South Channel Surfclam Exemption Program Review Report (Habitat PDT)
6. Final Report – EFP 23073 (Coonamessett Farm Foundation)
7. Correspondence