



New England Fishery Management Council

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

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 4, 2025
TO: Habitat Committee, Habitat Advisory Panel
FROM: Melissa Smith, Committee Chair

SUBJECT: Charge to Committee and Advisory Panel for September 11, 2025 meeting

There will be a joint Habitat Advisory Panel (AP) and Habitat Committee meeting on September 11 in Wakefield, MA and via webinar. We will begin at 9:00 am and aim to conclude the meeting by 3:00 pm. See here to register for the webinar: <https://nefmc-org.zoom.us/meeting/register/VsZQSyIsQ7aIyMThqjVJMg>.

Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Designation Framework

Initiated during the April 2025 Council meeting, this framework considers updated EFH designations for Atlantic cod, Atlantic herring, monkfish, barndoor skate, clearnose skate, little skate, rosette skate, smooth skate, thorny skate, and winter skate (ten species in total). The methods used to develop both the EFH map and text definitions build upon those developed as part of the EFH 5-Year Review, which was discussed during the January 2025 Habitat AP and Committee meeting and endorsed by the Council on January 28th. The framework includes a no action alternative, which is the existing Omnibus EFH Amendment 2 designations for all ten species, and an action alternative, which updates all designations. The EFH mapping and text description methods are the same for all species, relying on joint species distribution models and environmental and fishery independent survey data for estuaries and coastal habitats. The primary application of the EFH designations is through NOAA's EFH consultations, the process by which NOAA conveys conservation recommendations to federal agencies authorizing projects in both state and federal waters.

Staff will describe the designation approach as well as the process used to gather feedback from Plan Development Teams and Advisory Panels. Committee and Advisory Panel members are encouraged to ask questions about the methods and provide specific feedback on the EFH maps and text for each of the ten species. A goal for the meeting is to identify a preferred alternative in advance of final Council action, planned for September 24, 2025.

Sensitive Habitat Viewer Demonstration

Staff from NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Office Habitat and Ecosystem Services Division will demonstrate a recently developed habitat viewer story map. The purpose of this resource is to support EFH consultations. The viewer will aid project applicants and Federal action agency partners in using relevant sensitive habitat data to develop comprehensive EFH assessments for EFH consultations. This tool also supports Federal action agencies and project proponents in determining when an updated habitat survey for sensitive resources (such as submerged aquatic vegetation, rocky habitats, or

mudflats) may be requested. Committee and Advisory Panel members are encouraged to ask questions about the tool and share it with those who may find it useful. Here is a link to the viewer, <https://arcg.is/1DOfrX1>, which can be updated based on feedback.

Three-Year Dedicated Habitat Research Area Review

It is time for the three-year review of the two Dedicated Habitat Research Areas (DHRAs) designated via Omnibus EFH Amendment 2. We anticipate a similar process to the first review, conducted three years ago. Briefly, in summer 2022, GARFO published a [notice](#) seeking information from the public about research that had been conducted in the two DHRAs, for 30 days, and then developed a [memo](#) summarizing research activities relative to criteria established in Omnibus EFH Amendment 2. In September 2022, the Council reviewed the memo and decided to retain the Stellwagen DHRA but wanted more time to consider the Georges Bank DHRA. In November 2022, the Committee [recommended](#) keeping the Georges Bank DHRA in place because there had been data previously collected in the area, and it might serve as a control area for future studies. The Council concurred in December 2022.

Staff will provide an overview of this review process, including a draft schedule for this review. It would be useful for the Committee and Advisory Panel to consider whether they want an opportunity to review the planned memo from GARFO during a future Committee / Advisory Panel meeting, or if this issue can be brought directly to the Council for a recommendation. We are not necessarily planning another meeting prior to the December 2025 or January 2026 Council meeting but could schedule a webinar for this purpose or alternatively could develop a recommendation via correspondence.

Ocean Planning

Staff will provide a summary of recent ocean planning and development activities in the region and seek feedback from the Committee and Advisory Panel on the focus of Council work moving forward. Consultants will provide a short update on the Offshore Wind Regional Fund Administrator Compensation Process and can take any questions.

2026 Habitat Work Planning

Staff have recommended EFH and ocean planning-related work that could be completed following completion of the 2025 EFH framework. This includes a set of species to review via the 2026 EFH Framework (14-15 species) and next steps identified during the recent EFH Technical Review. Staff are seeking feedback from the Committee and Advisory Panel on 2026 Habitat work planning.

Other business

This is an opportunity to raise items not otherwise noted on the agenda. If you have information to share in advance of the meeting, please let me and Council staff know.