

New England Fishery Management Council

2026-2036 HOLISTIC STRATEGIC PLAN



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A Message from the Executive Committee

The New England Fishery Management Council has long stood at the center of a dynamic and often challenging balance: sustaining abundant fish populations while supporting the communities, businesses, and traditions that depend on them. For nearly five decades, the Council process has brought fishermen, scientists, managers, and the public together to make difficult decisions in pursuit of sustainable fisheries and resilient coastal economies.

This strategic plan reflects our commitment to strengthening that process for the future. The fisheries we manage today are affected by rapidly changing ecological, economic, and social conditions. Environmental change, evolving scientific understanding, technological advances, and shifting market dynamics are reshaping the conditions under which fisheries operate and are managed. At the same time, the expectations placed on fisheries management continue to grow, requiring greater transparency, collaboration, and responsiveness.

A strategic plan allows the Council to step back from the immediate demands of the regulatory process and focus on the broader direction of the organization. It provides a framework for improving how we conduct our work, engage with stakeholders, integrate science into decision-making, and coordinate with our federal, state, and regional partners.

Central to this effort is recognizing that effective fisheries management is not accomplished by the Council alone. It depends on the knowledge and experience of the fishing industry, the insights of scientists, the perspectives of communities, and the partnership of management agencies. Strengthening those relationships and ensuring that the Council process remains accessible, credible, and grounded in the best available science will be essential to our success.

This strategic plan is intended to guide the Council over the coming decade as we continue to refine our management approaches, improve our organizational effectiveness, and prepare for the challenges ahead. It is not only a roadmap for the Council as an institution, but also a commitment to the people and ecosystems of New England that our work ultimately serves.

By setting clear priorities and reinforcing our shared goals, we can ensure that the New England Fishery Management Council remains a strong and effective steward of the region's marine resources for generations to come.



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Working Draft - April 1, 2026

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Introduction

Background

The New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC, or the Council) is one of eight regional councils established by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) of 1976. The Council is mandated to conserve and manage fishery resources from three to 200 nautical miles off the coasts of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut (i.e., the United States Exclusive Economic Zone) (Figure 1). The Council's management authority extends to the Gulf of Maine, Georges Bank, and Southern New England, encompassing some of the nation's most iconic and economically significant marine fishery resources such as cod, haddock, flounder, Atlantic sea scallops, and Atlantic herring ([Management Plans - NEFMC](#)).

As a national leader in marine resource management, the Council develops recommendations through a collaborative process designed to ensure the long-term productivity of 28 marine species, including 41 stocks and one anadromous species, through nine fishery management plans (FMPs), while simultaneously supporting the commercial, recreational, and economic interests of New England's fishing communities. In supporting these interests, the Council works to ensure the region's fishing industry can achieve Optimum Yield while preventing overfishing and rebuilding overfished stocks. The Council faces growing challenges in the form of ecological, economic, and social variability, which make it more difficult for the Council to meet its statutory requirements.

The Council operationalizes its collaborative management framework through a network of key regional and federal partners, working in close coordination with its member states (Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut), NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) and Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC), as well as the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC). Regionally, NEFMC staff collaborate with the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC) to jointly manage shared stocks of monkfish and spiny dogfish. This coordination extends to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) for highly migratory species and habitat protections that span the entire Atlantic coast. More broadly, the Council engages closely with the five other regional fishery management councils: the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC), North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC), Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (WPFMC), Gulf Fishery Management Council (GFMC), and Caribbean Fishery Management Council (CFMC). All eight regional councils participate in the Council Coordination Committee (CCC) that addresses nationwide policy challenges. Finally, the Council collaborates and engages in international management through the Transboundary Management Guidance Committee, Northwest

Atlantic Fisheries Organization, International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, and other Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) as appropriate.

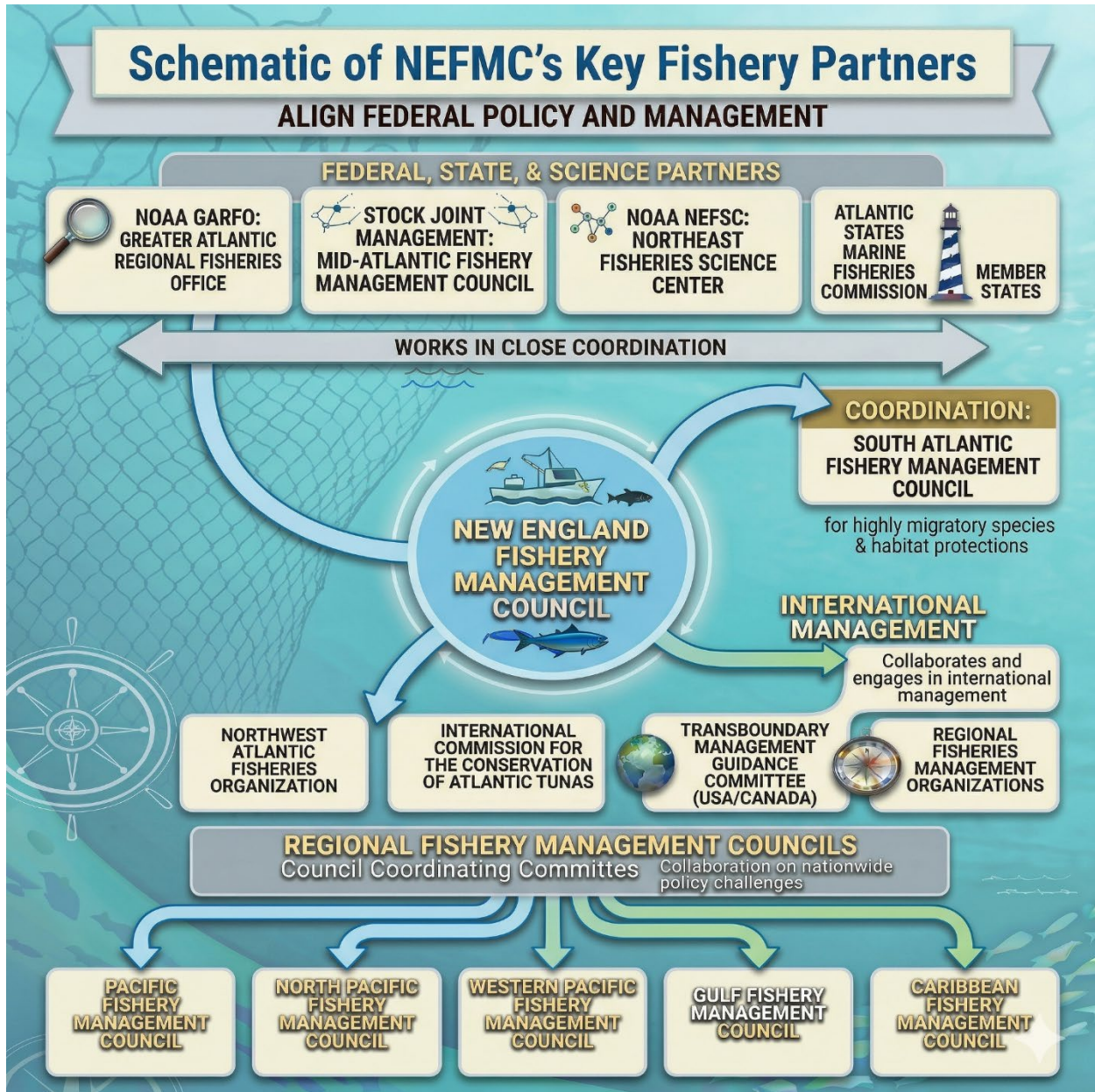


Figure 1. Key fishery partners of the NEFMC.

The Council's robust external partnerships are reinforced by its multifaceted internal structure, ensuring that management actions are grounded in the best available scientific information and that fishery stakeholders make meaningful contributions. Management actions are developed through an open, public process that integrates diverse expertise from six Oversight Committees, nine Advisory Panels (AP), ten Plan Development Teams (PDT), three Joint Committees, and the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) in an overarching, integrated approach.

Navigating a Changing Landscape

As fish stock productivity and distributions change in response to environmental conditions, and as available staffing and budgetary resources to manage fishery resources fluctuate, the Council must transition to a dynamic, adaptive, and forward-looking management framework to ensure the long-term resilience of New England's fishing industries and economy. While the Council continues to uphold its statutory mandates, implementing resilient and responsive management actions requires the cultivation of a deep culture of shared stewardship among the fishing industry, scientific community, and resource managers.

The Council acknowledges an urgent need to rebuild trust among scientists, managers, and industry partners to increase its management effectiveness. Therefore, the Council developed a holistic strategic plan to reaffirm its mission and establish an aspirational vision for the future. Through this strategic plan, the Council intends to modernize its operations to become a more agile, data-driven organization that can react quickly to ecological and fisheries changes. The strategic plan strives to ensure that every management decision is supported by relevant, transparent information that supports the increased success and profitability of New England fishing fleets. The plan will address ways to streamline internal processes and improve partner and stakeholder engagement.

Through its strategic plan, the Council will continue to foster partnerships and implement approaches to support the importance of New England's fisheries to the regional economy. Over the next ten years, the Council will guide the region toward a more sustainable and adaptive economy by evolving its processes to meet the complexities of shifting environmental conditions and management resources.

The Foundation

Institutional Stability, Constraints, and Assumptions

The development of this strategic plan includes several assumptions and expected conditions for the next ten years. Specifically, the MSA is expected to remain substantially unchanged, and existing mandates will continue to guide us. We expect our existing partnerships with external agencies (e.g., federal, state, and interstate commissions) and collaborators to continue. We assume that financial resources, staffing levels, and overall organizational capacity will not increase in the foreseeable future. We anticipate a reduction in the frequency of future stock assessments and that the current management structure, including managed species and their respective FMPs, may be subject to reorganization. Finally, we acknowledge that achieving objectives will require alternative scientific and management strategies.

The Council’s Vision and Mission

Two vision statements were created to describe an aspirational state for both the Council and New England Fisheries. The Council’s Mission Statement is derived directly from the text of the MSA under Sections 3, 302, and 303(a); see Appendix A for details of the supporting language used for the Council’s Mission Statement.

Our Vision for the Council

“We are a global leader in fisheries management and directly engage a broad array of stakeholders to provide a trusted, predictable, and well understood process that leads to successful and sustainable fisheries by applying flexible and efficient tools to address emerging and dynamic conditions.”

Our Vision for New England Fisheries

“We have enduring and abundant fishery resources that support:

- a) adaptive, profitable, and globally competitive fishing industries;*
- b) thriving recreational opportunities; and*
- c) robust fishing communities.”*

Our Mission

“The New England Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils established by federal legislation in 1976, is charged with conserving and managing fishery resources from three to 200 miles off the coasts of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut to prevent overfishing and rebuild overfished stocks, and to protect, restore, and promote the long-term health and stability of the fisheries.”

The Future

The strategic plan is built upon the Council's commitment to a science-driven, participatory management system. While the Council operates in a complex and rapidly evolving marine environment, the following Principles, Goals, Objectives, and Strategies will guide the Council's future operations and actions. We provide four specific goals with strategies to meet them.

Guiding Principles

These guiding principles represent our shared values and serve to demonstrate how we work to execute and achieve the goals and objectives of this strategic plan.

1. **Stewardship:** We are committed to an integrated strategy that balances environmental, economic, and social factors to operationalize ecosystem approaches to fisheries management.
2. **Trust:** We work to build and maintain stakeholder confidence through transparency, actionable feedback loops, and clear and respectful communication.
3. **Organizational Excellence:** We uphold the highest standards of analytical rigor and intentional collaboration, striving for excellence by streamlining workflows and supporting the workforce.
4. **Adaptability:** We proactively prepare for a dynamic future by moving from reactive decision-making to a system that anticipates and responds to resource conditions in real-time.
5. **Representative:** We ensure our actions support the long-term viability of the entire New England fleet, providing attention and opportunity across all managed species and communities.

Goals, Objectives, and Strategies

Goal 1 - Build flexibility and adaptability into Fishery Management Plans and streamline the process of developing management measures.

Description:

The Council will refine its management focus and respond to fishery management needs with greater agility by identifying, prioritizing, and completing initiatives more efficiently and effectively. The Council will expand capacity for Council members, staff, and partners by aligning intended outcomes with requested analyses, improving process efficiency, and reducing redundancy across operations.

Objectives:

- Optimize Council member, staff, and partner time for the development of actions.
- Refine information streams to reduce duplication, minimize preparation time, and streamline products, including the use of artificial intelligence and automation.
- Support the implementation of actions across all plans by the start of the fishing year.
- Increase the ability to adjust management measures in a timely manner.

Strategies:

Strategy 1: Revise the annual priority setting process	Strategy 2: Reduce redundancy in information sharing throughout action development	Strategy 3: Set specifications through streamlined processes, decoupled from other management measures	Strategy 4: Focus analyses and documentation on identified action objectives
Actions:	Actions:	Actions:	Actions:
Identify objectives to inform priority activities.	Enhance joint meeting opportunities among Plan Development Teams (PDT), Advisory Panels (AP), and the Committees (CTE).	Ensure timely development, review, and implementation of annual catch limits.	Optimize the range of alternatives considered for action.
Build consensus to prioritize top management needs.	Encourage participation in stock assessment and SSC meetings.	Consider revising specifications through in-season adjustment or streamlined analyses.	Prepare meeting documents in accordance with required analyses (e.g., NEPA or other statutory requirements).
Recommend priority activities within realistic capacity parameters, including all partners.	Focus meeting presentations and materials to target audiences and bundle routine items.	Allow flexible timelines for the development of management improvement actions.	Use AI/automation tools where applicable to generate summaries for user accessibility.

Goal 2 - Grow and strengthen partnerships between science, management, and fishing communities.

Description:

The Council will foster and improve engagement among scientists, managers, fishermen, and other partners to enhance participatory processes, build and maintain trust, and ensure clear, timely, and relevant input for decision-making. Transparent communication of scientific information, coupled with clearly defined management objectives and targeted stakeholder input, will support an environment that reduces system shocks and enables respectful dialogue and constructive collaboration.

Objectives:

- Increase participation from all user groups throughout the Council system and processes.
- Enhance the ability to communicate information in a professional and decision-relevant manner.
- Facilitate opportunities to improve science and management decisions by connecting all user groups.
- Ensure representative involvement in the development of science and management products.

Strategies:

Strategy 1: Develop communication tools and practices that support clear, consistent, and accessible information sharing	Strategy 2: Increase opportunities for stakeholder input to the scientific process and outputs	Strategy 3: Align science priority topics with management and fishing industry objectives
Actions:	Actions:	Actions:
Host and facilitate joint and multi-user meetings to address complex topics.	Formalize a community engagement strategy to provide input to stock assessments, survey methods, data treatments, fishery indices, etc.	Consider input from science partners when determining Council priorities.
Develop protocols for the use of technology and social media to enhance outreach.	Develop coupled engagement and retention strategies to reactivate and retain stakeholders in Council activities.	Refine the approach to updating Council Research Priorities, focusing on immediate, near-term, and long-term needs.
	Foster routine interactions between stock assessment scientists and fishermen at all stages of the assessment process.	Consider dedicated, collaborative time blocks for interorganizational discussion of FMPs, stocks, species, and regional requirements.

Goal 3 - Improve accessibility, quality, and use of data to inform decisions

Description:

The Council will optimize the suite of presented information and data streams to support transparent and adaptive management approaches. Adopting a dynamic approach to incorporate emerging data from fishery-dependent and independent sources will ensure the continued coproduction of fisheries information and collective ownership of management outcomes.

Objectives:

- Improve user understanding of data streams (i.e., collection methods, analysis tools, interpretation of results).
- Enhance opportunities to provide input about data needs to external partners.
- Balance consideration of quantitative and qualitative data to support management recommendations, including socioeconomic information.
- Apply the Council’s Risk Policy in specification-setting.
- Enhance application of emergent data to inform management recommendations.
- Conduct routine review of reports and analytical documents to ensure summary sections capture key concepts, clear actions/outcomes, and readability for all.

Strategies:

Strategy 1: Provide and encourage opportunities for all to teach/learn about data sources, treatments, analyses, interpretations, and applications	Strategy 2: Expand collaborative pathways for the application of fishery-dependent data	Strategy 3: Implement a Risk Policy that considers biological, environmental, and socioeconomic factors	Strategy 4: Streamline approaches to incorporate emergent information in a timely manner
Actions:	Actions:	Actions:	Actions:
Identify existing regional resources and assist with connectivity.	Strengthen partnerships between fishermen and agencies to broaden data collection.	Apply the policy iteratively using both quantitative and qualitative approaches.	Develop triggers and/or thresholds in harvest control rules for automatic adjustments.
Design/develop new training resources to interpret data/science and promote participation.	Facilitate training for fishermen on data quality standards and reporting expectations.	Identify data gaps that may be filled through qualitative approaches.	Define criteria and information sources to prompt near real-time management reactions.
Encourage individual engagement in education across topics.	Develop structured programs for fishermen to provide data for stock assessments.		Allow capacity for adjustments through the priority setting process.

Goal 4 – Optimize capacity to reflect fishery resources and improve fishing efficiency and safety

Description:

The Council will focus on forward-facing fishery management optimization. Ensuring that fishery capacity aligns with current and projected management objectives will improve the Council’s ability to identify and prioritize management activities to support safe, profitable, and sustainable fisheries.

Objectives:

- Determine the appropriate level of investment for stocks, management plans, fishery components, and community factors.
- Define “optimal capacity” and establish metrics for harvesting capacity and/or system capacity (e.g., processing, infrastructure, labor, regulatory structures).
- Build consensus for identified objectives related to fleet size and vessel characteristics, community dependence, diversity, and accessibility of permits.

Strategies:

Strategy 1: Identify a justified investment level for all stocks across FMPs to reflect objectives and human resource capacity	Strategy 2: Consider capacity issues in a piecemeal approach with manageable steps	Strategy 3: Dedicate resources to directly address fishery capacity issues and questions
Actions:	Actions:	Actions:
Complete the Risk/Value Matrix in collaboration with regional partners and stakeholders.	Leverage ongoing Inflation Reduction Act initiatives (e.g., permit portfolios, governance, groundfish transition).	Establish a regional working group and organize listening sessions for target audiences.
Consider the use of Ecosystem Component Species designations for current and future management needs.	Utilize results from the vessel baseline restriction evaluation.	Commit to a process to advance goals with detailed milestones and decision points.

Implementation & Accountability

The strategic plan is only as effective as its execution. To move from a reactive to a resilient state, this plan must be treated as a core organizational function. This section outlines the framework for operationalizing our strategic goals and provides an example structure for tracking progress, aligning resources, and maintaining transparency with our stakeholders. To appropriately implement the strategies described in this plan, we must deliberately align our internal systems, governance structures, and culture. The approaches listed below will be formalized through the development of an Implementation Plan.

The Council will adopt a diligent performance management approach to clearly define and implement initiatives, engage key stakeholders, track and communicate progress, and improve processes through continuous feedback. In addition, the Council will synchronize its strategic goals with its annual priority-setting process to ensure that long-term objectives inform the establishment of priorities rather than compete with them.

Progress Reports

The Council's Executive Director and Executive Committee will conduct periodic reviews to (1) monitor the percentage of time allocated to strategic initiatives, (2) assess progress toward strategic targets, (3) identify risks, constraints, and barriers, and (4) identify and recommend adjustments.

Annual Priority Alignment

Every year, the Council will demonstrate how the proposed priorities directly support the strategic goals outlined in this plan. No annual initiative should move forward without a documented link to (1) a strategic goal, (2) a measurable outcome, and (3) identified ownership and resource allocation. This alignment mechanism ensures strategic continuity and prevents mission drift.

Adaptive Mid-Cycle Adjustments

To remain agile, the Council will consider triggers that allow for mid-cycle adjustments, for example, when:

- External regulatory or environmental conditions change;
- Resource availability changes;
- Performance indicators fall substantially below target; or
- Risk increases beyond predefined thresholds.

Adaptive adjustments will be documented and formally reviewed by the Council to maintain transparency and governance integrity.

Appendix A – Supporting Language for Mission Statement

The Council and their fishery management process, plans, and responsibilities are rooted in the MSA. The mission statement for the Council was derived from the following text of the MSA.

In MSA Section 2 - FINDINGS, PURPOSES, AND POLICY

(a) “The Congress finds and declares... (6) A national program for the conservation and management of the fishery resources of the United States is necessary to prevent overfishing, to rebuild overfished stocks, to ensure conservation, to facilitate long-term protection of essential fish habitats, and to realize the full potential of the Nation's fishery resources.”

And in MSA Section 3 - DEFINITIONS:

(5): “The term ‘conservation and management’ refers to all of the rules, regulations, conditions, methods, and other measures:

(A) which are required to rebuild, restore, or maintain, and which are useful in rebuilding, restoring, or maintaining, any fishery resource and the marine environment; and;

(B) which are designed to assure that—

(i) a supply of food and other products may be taken, and that recreational benefits may be obtained, on a continuing basis;

(ii) irreversible or long-term adverse effects on fishery resources and the marine environment are avoided; and

(iii) there will be a multiplicity of options available with respect to future uses of these resources.”

The Council was formally established under MSA Section 302(a)(1)(A):

“The New England Fishery Management Council shall consist of the States of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut and shall have authority over the fisheries in the Atlantic Ocean seaward of such States (except as provided in paragraph (3)). The New England Council shall have 17 voting members, including 11 appointed by the Secretary in accordance with subsection (b)(2) (at least one of whom shall be appointed from each such State).”

Further, the MSA explicitly details the Council’s functions under MSA Section 302(h), including FMP requirements:

(1) “...for each fishery under its authority that requires conservation and management, [each Council shall] prepare and submit to the Secretary (A) a fishery management plan, and (B) amendments to each such plan that are necessary from time to time (and promptly whenever changes in conservation and management measures in another fishery substantially affect the fishery for which such plan was developed);

As part of the January 2026 Planning Workshop, specific MSA language was discussed to reaffirm the Council’s mission outlined in Section 302(a)(1)(A). The Council’s mission statement was enhanced to include the underlined text from MSA Section 303(a)(1)(A):

“Any fishery management plan which is prepared by any Council, or by the Secretary, with respect to any fishery, shall contain the conservation and management measures, applicable to foreign fishing and fishing by vessels of the United States, which are necessary and appropriate for the conservation and management of the fishery to prevent overfishing and rebuild overfished stocks, and to protect, restore, and promote the long-term health and stability of the fishery.”