New England Fishery Management Council
Holistic Strategic Plan
Final Report

April 8, 2026

Acknowledgments

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We would like to thank all participants for their time and insightful, positive engagement with our Team. The responses and feedback provided by participants in our interviews, questionnaires and workshop allowed us to conduct a comprehensive review of existing programs, processes, policies, and practices to foster forward-thinking approach to the fishery management process and create a vision for New England fisheries.

We would especially like to thank the individuals that helped guide and shape this report: Dr. Cate O'Keefe, Jonathon Peros, Michelle Bachman, Emily Bodell, Connor Buckley, John Popalardo, Travis Ford, Mary Sabo, Emilie Franke, and Michael Simpkins, as well as all of the other members of the New England Council and Council staff for their thoughtful feedback and guidance throughout this project. All pictures provided in the document are courtesy of the New England Fishery Management Council, Green Fin Studios and Adobe stock images where noted.

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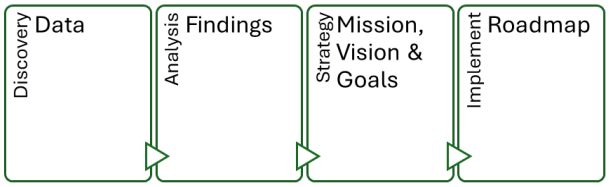
Executive Summary

The New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC), in collaboration with the Parnin Group and Lynker Corporation, has developed a Holistic Strategic Plan (HSP) to navigate an increasingly complex environment. This initiative aims to modernize fisheries management by addressing climate-driven species shifts, management uncertainty, and socioeconomic realities over the next five to ten years.

Project Methodology



The development of the HSP followed a structured three-phase approach, beginning with the Discovery Phase, which utilized individual interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires from 78 unique respondents, alongside a benchmarking analysis of peer councils and document research of Council processes and internal guidelines. The Analysis Phase followed this where root causes of organizational inefficiencies were diagnosed, identifying gaps in Council structure/operations, adaptive management, communications, and workforce capacity. The process concluded with the Strategic Planning and Recommendations Phase, which culminated in a January 2026 workshop where Council members and its partners built consensus on new mission and vision statements and core goals, supplemented by additional recommendations from the Project Team.

Key Findings and Organizational Gaps

Regarding key findings and organizational gaps, while the Council system is scientifically grounded and provides robust content to manage multiple fisheries collaboratively, it is currently structurally overburdened and reactive. Specific areas of concern include Governance & Efficiency, relating to decision-making and priority-setting; Trust & Engagement, involving transparency and equitable representation; Workforce & Resources, regarding capacity constraints; and Adaptation & Resilience, focusing on the ability to anticipate ecological changes.

The resulting Strategic Framework for the HSP is anchored by a mission to protect the long-term health of fisheries and is driven by four primary goals. These include:

- **Goal 1** - Build flexibility and adaptability into Fishery Management Plans and streamline the process of developing management measures.
- **Goal 2** - Grow and strengthen partnerships between science, management, and fishing communities.
- **Goal 3** - Improve accessibility, quality, and use of data to inform decisions.
- **Goal 4** – Optimize capacity to reflect fishery resources and improve fishing efficiency and safety.

To ensure the plan's success, the Council will utilize a five-phase roadmap—Foundation, Launch, Build, Expand, and Sustain—and a RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed)

matrix to define clear ownership of actions. Implementation focuses on aligning annual priorities with strategic goals and adopting a "one-in, one-out" approach to manage staff workload effectively, with progress monitored through Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and periodic reviews.

Photo source: Green Fin Studios

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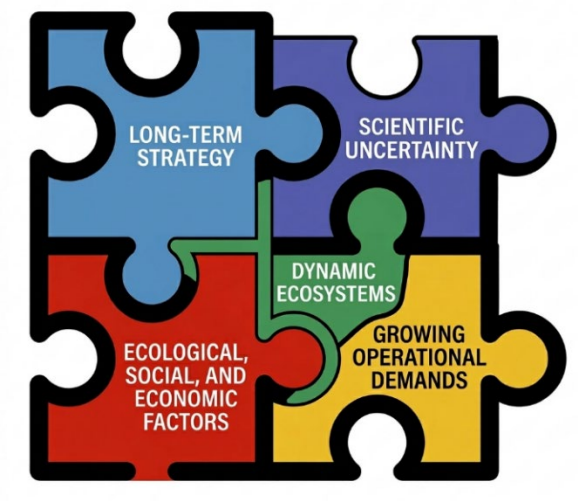
Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym or Abbreviation	Definition
AP	Advisory Panel
ASMFC	Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission
CESC	Climate and Ecosystem Steering Committee
CFMC	Caribbean Fishery Management Council
FMP	Fishery Management Plan
GARFO	Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office
HSP	Holistic Strategic Plan
IRA	Inflation Reduction Act
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MAFMC	Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council
MSA	Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act
NEFMC or Council	New England Fishery Management Council
NEFSC	Northeast Fisheries Science Center
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NMFS or NOAA Fisheries	National Marine Fisheries Service
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NPFMC	North Pacific Fishery Management Council
OST	Oversight Team
PDT	Plan Development Team
PESTLE	Political, Economic, Social, Legal, Technological, Environmental
PFMC	Pacific Fishery Management Council
RACI	Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed
SAFMC	South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
SSC	Scientific and Statistical Committee
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
WPFMC	Western Pacific Fishery Management Council

1 Introduction

The New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC, or the Council), one of eight regional bodies established by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), is responsible for managing some of the most economically and historically significant fisheries in the United States. Today, the Council is navigating in an increasingly complex and dynamic environment, where climate-driven shifts in species distribution, stock variability, and rising ecological and socioeconomic uncertainties influence the Council's decision-making process. To ensure the Council's decision-making process, staff, and operation procedures are up to the challenge of these emerging realities, the Council partnered with The Parnin Group and Lynker Corporation (the Project Team, or Team) to initiate a multi-phase strategic planning effort to develop a Holistic Strategic Plan (HSP). The project team designed an approach to address overarching challenges associated with management uncertainty and ecosystem changes while positioning the Council to make timely, science-based decisions that are agile, equitable, and resilient to impacts from climate change.



The strategic initiative supports the Council's commitment to further develop its existing operational strengths while identifying specific areas where it can improve its processes, policies, and practices. The Team utilized a comprehensive methodology to document Council functions, identify drivers of both efficiency and inefficiency, and provide actionable recommendations based on these findings. Further, this effort built upon a body of ongoing work, including various Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) projects and the Climate and Ecosystem Steering Committee's (CESC) process-mapping and communications initiatives, all of which the Council intends to improve fisheries management in the New England region.

Central to this work was the collaborative development of new mission and vision statements for the Council alongside a set of strategic goals to guide Council initiatives over the next five to ten years. The Council and its partners designed these foundational elements to equip the Council to respond more nimbly to shifting fish distributions and evolving management obligations. Ultimately, the strategic plan resulting from this effort provides a forward-thinking roadmap to focus limited staffing and budgetary resources on actionable priorities, ensuring the Council can continue to support the commercial, recreational, and economic interests of New England's fishing communities in a rapidly changing climate.

Goals and Objectives

The Project Team's overarching objective is to position the Council to make timely, science-based decisions that are efficient, resilient, and aligned with emerging environmental and economic realities. More specifically, this effort seeks to:

1. Document existing approaches and processes utilized by the Council, including those that the Council employs to address unpredictable changes to fishery trends, cycles, and a changing management landscape;
2. Identify key drivers of successful and unsuccessful approaches, and link drivers to existing and alternative processes; and,

3. Develop a holistic strategic plan to guide Council approaches and activities for resilient and responsive fisheries management initiatives.

Methodology

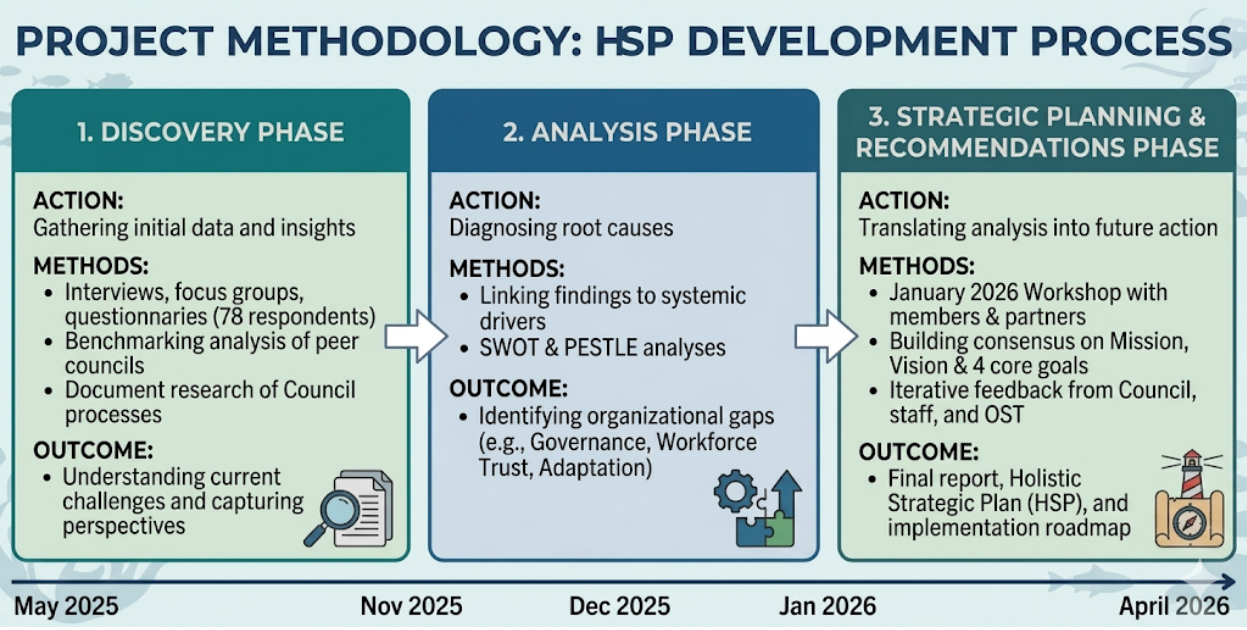
The Project Team structured its engagement with the Council around three sequential phases, which the Team designed to move from research and diagnosis to actionable planning (Figure 1.

The Discovery Phase examined the current state of the Council's fishery management processes through interviews, focus groups, advisory body questionnaires, benchmarking against other fishery management councils, and document review, supplemented by SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threads) and PESTLE (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental) analyses. This phase surfaced key organizational findings, captured diverse participant perspectives, and identified where Council processes function well or break down.

The Analysis Phase built on findings from the Discovery Phase by identifying the root causes and systemic drivers behind key inefficiencies and organizational challenges. By linking drivers to specific symptoms and mapping critical gaps, this phase established the analytical foundation necessary to develop meaningful, evidence-based recommendations.

The Strategic Planning and Recommendations Phase translated findings and analysis into action. Drawing on additional stakeholder input, a strategic planning workshop, and iterative Council feedback, the Team developed a draft HSP, recommendations, an implementation roadmap, and performance metrics. The Team delivered the final report and draft strategic plan to the Council in April 2026, with the Council retaining authority to finalize and implement the plan as it sees fit.

Figure 1. Methodology for creating a holistic strategic plan.



Discovery Phase

- **Activities**: Gathered insights through interviews, focus groups, advisory group and Council staff questionnaires, benchmarking against three peer fishery management councils, and review of the Council's documented policies, processes, and fishery management plans FMPs). Conducted SWOT and PESTLE analyses.
- **Outcomes**: Identified key challenges, captured participant perspectives, and mapped where processes operate efficiently or break down.

The Discovery Phase examined the current state of the Council's fishery management process and related challenges/successes through research and interviews with key staff, leadership, and active participants in the process.

We highlight several overarching findings that currently shape and challenge the Council's organizational operations, efficiencies, and adaptive approaches to management in Section 2: Discovery and Gap Analyses. During this phase, the Team also distributed online questionnaires to gather insights regarding the Council's advisory bodies with the goal of improving efficiency, efficacy, coordination, and clarity of purpose.

Additionally, the Team conducted a benchmark analysis (see Appendix B: Benchmarking Analysis). This analysis included a high-level comparison of staffing, organizational structure, action timelines, advisory body make-up, and meeting duration of the NEFMC to other U.S. Regional Fishery Management Councils to identify best practices for addressing regulatory and ecosystem challenges through comparative insights on governance, strategic planning, and performance.

Analysis Phase

- **Activities**: Translated Discovery Phase findings into deeper insights by identifying gaps, including misalignments and root causes.
- **Outcomes**: Diagnosed system-level drivers for identified symptoms and clarifying how different factors shape Council effectiveness.

During this phase, the Project Team identified key drivers of inefficiencies and potential improvements from data and information collected in the Discovery Phase. The Team also linked key drivers to specific challenges and highlighted trends to paint a comprehensive picture of the Council and its processes. This was a critical step in our process to ground truth our findings, drivers, and identified gaps in critical information needed to conduct the final phase.

Strategic Planning and Recommendations Phase

- **Activities**: Conducted additional inquiries, as needed, through Council feedback based on the Gap Analysis. Conducted strategic planning workshop to support drafting of the strategic plan.
- **Outcomes**: Final report on recommended changes, strategic plan, and roadmap for implementation.

The Recommendation Phase of the project comprised the development of draft HSP alongside actionable recommendations to enhance the Council's resilient and responsive fisheries management process. In December 2025, based on feedback from additional data collection and feedback, the Team began formulating draft recommendations in preparation for the January 2026 Strategic Planning Workshop with Council members (see Section 3: Strategic Planning Workshop).

Following the workshop, the refinement of the draft plan included additional reviews and feedback from Council staff and the project Oversight Team (OST). In early April, the Team provided the Council

with this final report and a draft HSP (see Appendix D: Strategic Plan – Council Working Draft), including an implementation roadmap and associated performance metrics. We note that the Council will finalize and implement the plan as desired.

Assumptions and Constraints

The information underpinning our evaluation was primarily, but not completely, qualitative, acquired through focus group interviews, individual interviews, and questionnaire responses. Given the strategic nature of this review, quantitative data analysis was limited in scope. However, the Team conducted some quantitative analyses to inform and supplement the project; see Appendix B: Benchmarking Analysis. Further, this project was intentionally collaborative, with Council staff and Council members providing iterative guidance and feedback throughout. As such, the Team emphasized and/or prioritized some elements as work unfolded, leading to shifts in project scope and approach. Together, this information, coupled with feedback from the OST, allowed our Team to:

1. Gauge how participants ranked statements and expressed priorities identified during the Analysis Phase, particularly as they relate to the Council's organizational effectiveness and current strategic direction.
2. Surface areas of alignment and tension between current practices and the Council's aspirational goals, informing the revision of its mission and vision statements.
3. Identify operational and structural considerations that have implications on the Council's capacity to execute against its strategic priorities in the years ahead.

Since the project focused on both management processes and longer-term strategic positioning, the insights of those most engaged in the Council's work and most representative of participant priorities and concerns informed our findings and recommendations. We highlight two primary limitations to our analyses below.

Analysis Limitations

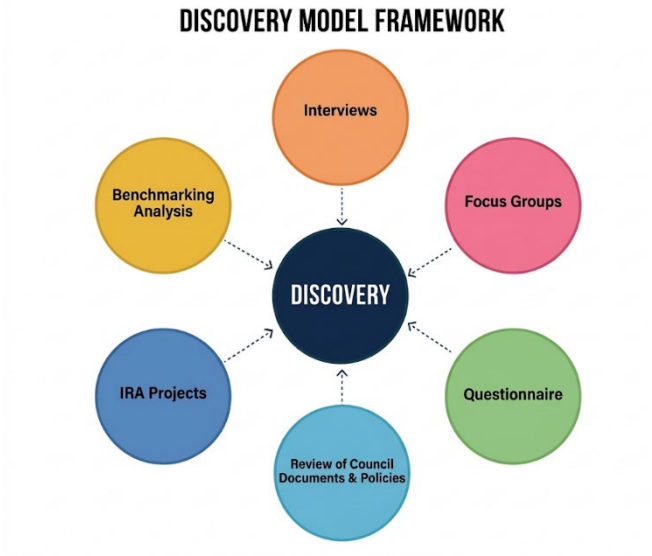
The data we present rely on input from a subset of individuals who responded to our interview and questionnaire requests, rather than a randomized sample of Council-process participants. The program review was primarily limited to participants with active, ongoing engagement in the Council process, providing well-informed qualitative data but potentially underrepresenting the perspectives of more peripheral or infrequent participants in the Council process and operations.

The Team addressed this constraint by interviewing and surveying broad representatives from all major stakeholder groups invested in the Council process, and by treating stakeholder mapping as an ongoing and iterative part of our methodology. We organized participants into groups based on their affiliation, including Council members (voting and non-voting), Council staff, Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) members, Advisory Panel (AP) members, Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) liaisons, Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) staff and management, NMFS Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) staff and management, and other representatives engaged in the Council's management process. By regularly asking key participants to identify groups that were less well-represented in our outreach, we conducted targeted follow-up engagement with additional stakeholder groups. The Team's iterative approach was particularly important given the strategic dimensions of this review, as perspectives on mission and vision can vary considerably across stakeholder groups with differing relationships to the Council's work.

2 Discovery and Gap Analyses

The Discovery and Analysis Phases of this effort culminated in a Discovery and Gap Analyses document provided to the Council in November 2025 (see Appendix A: Discovery and Gap Analyses). The objective of these analyses was to determine what type of challenges the Council faces in enacting its fishery management process, as well as to move beyond a cursory list of findings to provide preliminary diagnoses of system-level drivers that influence Council effectiveness and efficiency. We intended the identification of overarching challenges in the Council process to better inform strategic interventions and ensure the Council's management approaches support climate-resilient fisheries in the New England region.

The analyses followed a structured pathway from data collection to identification of root causes. Data collected through stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires distributed to advisory bodies captured the current state of the Council process. The gap analysis relied on discovery findings to distinguish gaps leading to challenges across Council operations such that subsequent efforts could adequately evaluate tradeoffs, set priorities, and provide necessary information for meaningful strategic planning. Both analyses provided organized information required for the Council's Strategic Planning Workshop held in early January 2026, during which participants formed the core of the strategic plan.



To guide and implement this project, the Council assigned an OST. The Team presented a preliminary Discovery Analysis to the OST on October 16, 2025. Our Team revised the document based on their feedback, and the OST conducted another review of the Discovery and Gap Analyses on November 25, 2025. The OST provided essential feedback aimed at refining the report's clarity and focus. Based on their feedback, we synthesized the findings into cross-cutting themes, utilized quantitative data to anchor discussions, and explicitly linked findings to broader Council initiatives, such as the IRA projects. We also included Council successes, focus group/interview/questionnaire participant details and statistics, executive summaries, and sample success metrics.

Discovery Analysis

Our Approach

The Discovery Analysis involved detailed data collection from several relevant sources:

- **Interviews and focus groups** with Council members, staff, Plan Development Teams (PDTs), Council Advisory Panel (AP) members, Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) members, Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) personnel, Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) personnel, industry representatives, staff of non-governmental

organizations (NGOs), and representatives from other partner agencies (e.g., the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, or ASMFC);
- **A questionnaire** issued to Council staff as well as advisory body chairs and vice chairs;
- **Detailed review of Council documents and policies**, including meeting materials, technical documents, and regulatory requirements;
- **Evaluation of parallel initiatives**, such as other Council IRA efforts;
- **A benchmarking** analysis that evaluated staffing, budgets, governance structures, and process timelines across four regional fishery management councils (see Appendix B: Benchmarking Analysis); and
- **Assessment of current, written adaptive management approaches and processes** that the Council employs in response to variable fishery trends, cycles, and the evolving management landscape (see Appendix C: Current Adaptive Management Approach).

Collectively, the interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires provided input from 78 unique informants across participants in the Council process including Council members/staff, NOAA Fisheries staff, and multiple advisory body members (including chairs and vice chairs), and industry members. These perspectives are supplemented by data from our benchmarking analysis and evaluation of Council policies, efforts, and contemporary adaptive management approaches to clarify emerging themes. Discovery data are limited by underrepresentation from certain groups due to logistical constraints and the nature of voluntary participation, and benchmarking was constrained by the inconsistency of publicly available information across the regional fishery management councils.

Our Findings

The Discovery Analysis identified that the Council system is designed to obtain and assess best available scientific information, through a plethora of participatory advisory bodies with limited staff support; however, it is structurally overburdened and its operations tend to be reactive. Generally, participants perceived the Council process as being inhibited by its complexity, the lack of necessary resources, and growing distrust between decision-makers and stakeholders, resulting in difficulties to consistently adaptive management that is resilient to external factors.

The Team categorized findings into four major topic areas:

- **Governance & Efficiency**: Items related to how the Council makes decisions, sets priorities, and navigates the complexities of its management process.
- **Trust & Engagement**: Items related to transparency, feedback loops, and equitable representation that affect the engagement of process participants.
- **Workforce & Resources**: Items related to capacity and resource constraints that may affect staff's ability to implement adaptive management or address strategic priorities.
- **Adaptation & Resilience**: Items related to the Council's ability to anticipate and address fishery and ecological changes.

Of these four topic areas, respondents involved in the project's data collection activities most frequently mentioned Trust & Engagement, followed by Governance & Efficiency; the least cited topic was Workforce & Resources.

Governance & Efficiency

Findings related to Governance & Efficiency generally emphasized that the Council's use of advisory bodies such as APs and PDTs successfully ensures high-quality, science-based recommendations with ample opportunity for public engagement. Respondents cited both the scallop survey system and the herring fishery trigger-based quota adjustments as successful data collection and management models. However, the sheer volume of ongoing management actions, alternatives, and multi-layered review processes, typically conducted in short time frames, make the process difficult to navigate and less efficient.

Relatedly, participants acknowledged a lack of clear ownership of specific tasks and actions between advisory groups that further diminishes efficiency. Insufficient coordination, both internally across advisory bodies and externally with partners, has led to increased complications in completing necessary reviews and translating outputs into management in a timely manner. Despite these challenges, participants noted the Council's more recent adherence to its long-term priorities, which they described as previously being impeded by emergency issues and external pressures.

Trust & Engagement

Findings under the Trust & Engagement category were primarily related to frustrations among stakeholders who perceived that engagement is, at times, conducted out of statutory or obligatory necessity rather than a genuine desire to obtain and use their feedback to shape final outcomes. These frustrations have been exacerbated by scientific findings and regulatory decisions that stakeholders find surprising, especially if they do not align with empirical observations, weakening relationships and trust. Participants highlighted a need for plain-language explanations of new science and management decisions alongside prompt follow-up after the Council collects their feedback (e.g., a description of how stakeholder feedback was or was not incorporated into decision-making, with rationale) to qualm beliefs that regulatory decisions are made behind closed doors.

Some participants believed that the composition of advisory bodies is unbalanced and does not adequately represent stakeholder groups, and that the leaders of these groups may have inequitable influence over guidance those bodies provide to the Council. It was encouraged that neutral staff members present summary reports to accurately reflect group consensus, as Council staff were generally considered with great respect and positivity given their collaboration and availability. However, declining capacity of staff can erode participant trust if it decreases their accessibility or communication to stakeholders. Council staff are proactively developing approaches to ensure continued, robust outreach (e.g., leveraging social media and other interactive methods).

Participants believed that issues associated with equity also extend to the Council's attention and engagement structures. Many believed that larger, high-profile management plans dominate the Council's time and resources to the detriment of less prominent fisheries. This extends to advisory bodies, where members of committees related to smaller management plans describe their groups as less active compared to those handling major stocks. Additionally, the way the Council conducts engagements tends to amplify the voices of well-organized, established groups while minimizing those smaller operators and new entrants to the process.

Workforce & Resources

Findings related to Workforce & Resources in the federal fishery management system show that staff are overburdened by strict procedures, resource constraints, substantial (and increasing) analytical

needs, and dense administrative requirements. Despite universal perceptions of dedicated Council and federal staff, their heavy workload can consume nearly all available bandwidth, leaving virtually no time for strategic planning or innovation. The sheer volume of required analysis, meetings, documentation, and advisory activity exceeds current organizational capacity, which can lead to delays in action development and prevent the streamlining of operations. Regardless, participants believed that staff remain motivated to analyze as thoroughly as possible (given time constraints) the necessary fishery issues to support informed Council decision-making.

Adaptation & Resilience

Reports on Adaptation & Resilience consistently show that the Council's management process is too slow to keep up with shifting ecological conditions and changing priorities. Participants believed that ecosystem shifts are outpacing management cycles, as there is generally a three-to-four-year lag between environmental observation and regulatory implementation due to the length of time to produce adequate science and conduct requisite reviews; this leads to the perception that management decisions are enacted in response to conditions that may no longer exist. Accordingly, many felt that management remains focused on short-term fixes and routine actions in lieu of deliberate, long-term reforms. Despite the current reality, participants acknowledged that leadership is actively trying to structure the Council to be more forward-thinking and to address fishery resiliency in the face of climate change. Participants viewed the Council process as having the necessary components for long-standing, resilient fisheries and is engaging in efforts to provide greater adaptivity to ecosystem and socioeconomic changes.

The analyses highlighted that stakeholders view the current permit system as costly, rigid, and complex, preventing operators from diversifying their business models to target abundant species when their primary stocks shift or decline. Industry expressed that they are limited in their adaptability; they often observe abundant species on the water that they are legally unable to harvest due to dated management provisions. Participants expressed that the density of regulations makes it difficult to implement simple, nimble adjustments. However, stakeholders also expressed optimism that the permit system could maintain conservation goals while promoting greater mobility with thoughtful changes.

Many participants viewed existing data systems are fragmented and siloed, preventing efficient cross-agency coordination. Participants also noted interest in shifting towards more holistic management approaches that integrate environmental, economic, and social factors, and there was a willingness among respondents to partner in data collection if the Council recognizes and values the feedback.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking against peer fishery management councils (e.g., the Pacific, Mid-Atlantic, and South Atlantic regional fishery Management Councils) revealed a sharp contrast in NEFMC's performance. While the NEFMC leads in efficiency for framework actions (averaging 16 months), it has the longest timeline of the four organizations for amendment actions, averaging 58 months. This is primarily because the NEFMC's initial development phase is significantly longer than those of the other three councils. Additionally, the Council maintains more sub-bodies than any of the other benchmarked councils with smaller rosters; while having fewer participants allows for more nimbleness, risks are introduced with respect to participant fatigue and succession planning. See Appendix B for the complete benchmark analysis.

Implications of the Discovery Phase

The cumulative findings of the Discovery Phase illustrate the Council as an organization operating at an inflection point where the traditional participatory model is increasingly strained by modern environmental and regulatory variability. Taken together, these findings reveal a system navigating the overlapping pressures of complexity within its numerous sub-bodies, escalating stakeholder expectations for transparency, and increasing operational demands that now exceed available funding and capacity. To move from observation to intervention, the project effort transitioned to its formal Analysis Phase designed to diagnose the root causes of these misalignments. By examining how strategy, structure, and organizational systems interact with the Council's staffing and leadership styles, focus shifted to why certain challenges persist. This analytical bridge is essential to clarify the systemic drivers that reinforce existing gaps, providing the necessary foundation for developing the targeted, actionable solutions that will address them in the Council's strategic plan.

Gap Analysis

As part of the Analysis Phase following the Discovery Phase, our Gap Analysis translated the uncovered symptoms into organizational gaps that can be addressed by the Council's strategic plan. Accordingly, the Gap Analysis identified areas of potential focus to inform discussion at the Council's Strategic Planning Workshop in January 2026 rather than offering final recommendations.

Our Approach

Our Gap Analysis moved beyond the usual "what" to also examine "why" challenges persist in the Council process with respect to executing strategic objectives. The analysis identified misalignments across the Council's interconnected strategies, organizational structures, operational systems, and workforce capacity, specifically revealing trade-offs worth more intentional discernment (e.g., mandates versus processes, needs versus capacity, or expectations versus performance). Our effort also tied other ongoing Council IRA projects to the findings to show that other efforts are in the process of solving some of the issues we identified.

The Gap analysis provided more organized information for strategic planning purposes, established reasonable boundaries for feasible recommendations, and supported decision-making in the realm of setting strategic priorities. Identified areas did not represent formal recommendations but rather reflected aspects that warranted further exploration during the strategic planning workshop and the subsequent Recommendations Phase.

Our Findings

The analysis identified the following gaps as the most notable with respect to the Council's strategic planning purposes:

1. *The Council lacks mechanisms to prioritize long-term strategy over reactive decision-making.*

The Council's focus on urgent, short-term issues absorbs capacity that would be required for more deliberate strategic planning and adaptive management. Similarly, the Council's process design and workload patterns leave little space for scenario planning. As a result, the Council's ability to address ecological change, advance resilience, and align operations with strategic intent is limited.

2. *The Council's management plans are not designed to adjust to dynamic ecosystems.*

Management actions lag environmental shifts, and existing plan structures inhibit timely adaptation of models or management triggers to adjust for them. Fishermen described limited ability to diversify operations in response to changing conditions due to rigid permitting systems, while scientific

partners noted that emerging ecological changes cannot be addressed; the changes are typically unable to be incorporated into developing or recently conducted stock assessments and subsequent harvest specifications without additional delays. Relatedly, coordination challenges between the Council and NMFS lead to inconsistent timelines and delays in data delivery. Taken together, these mismatches limit the Council's ability to pursue adaptive approaches.

3. *There is insufficient integration of ecological, social, and economic information to operationalize EAFM as a part of Council decision-making.*

There is limited use of social and economic data in management decision-making stemming from gaps in socioeconomic analysis and an associated perception that science does not reflect real-world realities for regional fisheries. Without a consistent approach for the Council to integrate these disparate data streams into the federal fisheries management process, holistic management in pursuit of truly resilient fishery operations remains difficult to implement. Moreover, the scarcity of socioeconomic considerations contributes to stakeholder skepticism and inequitable reliance on biological input to drive the Council's recommendations. The lack of socioeconomic considerations also alludes to a larger overall issue of fragmented data systems that hinder the agile sharing and evaluation of necessary information for adaptive management purposes.

4. *The Council's current approaches to communicate scientific uncertainty do not build sufficient trust.*

In their perspective, stakeholders receive scientific information without adequate explanation, contextualization, or early dialogue, resulting in a lack of confidence especially when management outcomes based on that science impede fishing operations and impact livelihoods. Surprise results and limited plain-language communication further result in perceptions of inconsistency between science and empirical observations. The Council often elects to pursue risk-averse management decisions that prioritize precautionary restrictions when faced with uncertainty rather than investigate adaptive approaches. These dynamics deepen the trust deficit, which reduces support for science-based decisions and undermines confidence in the management process.

5. *Current and growing operational demands exceed the Council's workforce capacity.*

In the Council's current process, the volume of required meetings, analyses, documentation, and coordination continues to outpace available capacity. The Council's staffing approach relies on a relatively small number of highly specialized staff with limited redundancy for critical roles. Further, procedural requirements often generate administrative burden with middling utility, forcing a relatively small staff to spend unnecessary time on alternatives that are never realistically considered. Collectively, these process and workforce considerations materialize as bottlenecks, delays, fatigue, and reduced bandwidth for innovation and proactive planning to feed adaptivity.

Implications of the Gaps

Many of the gaps identified by the analysis are interconnected, describing a system that is scientifically grounded and highly collaborative, yet increasingly strained by growing complexity and rising expectations. Limited capacity and long processes restrict the ability to plan strategically, creating a cycle where reactivity replaces adaptivity. Communication challenges with both stakeholders and partners erode trust, making it more difficult to receive substantive buy-in for management decision-making. Inflexible management requirements combined with insufficient capacity further hinder the Council's ability to adapt.

While our analysis highlighted misalignments that limit efficiency, responsiveness, and participant confidence, it revealed opportunities to strengthen the Council's management system. The identified gaps informed the development of the strategic plan by supporting the prioritization of

impact areas, establishment of success metrics, and emphasis of dimensions where the Council can build meaningful momentum.

The opportunities outlined below are potential areas where small but deliberate adjustments could lead to positive outcomes.

- **Improve transparency and understanding** by developing visual maps that clarify how actions progress, where decisions occur, and how priorities align across advisory bodies.
- **Strengthen coordination and focus** with clear short- and long-term prioritization processes and more deliberate workload balance.
- **Expand staff capabilities** by investing in training and tools that can expand analytical capacity and reduce burden.
- **Enhance adaptive management** capacity by establishing triggers that drive responses to real-time economic and environmental changes.
- **Reinforce trust and enhance stakeholder engagement** by creating consistent feedback loops that show participants how their input informs decisions and by offering plain language updates between meetings.

Moreover, the findings from the Discovery and Analysis phases served as the essential baseline for the Strategic Planning Workshop, which was structured to move the Council from assessing its current reality to defining a visionary and resilient future state.

3 Strategic Planning Workshop

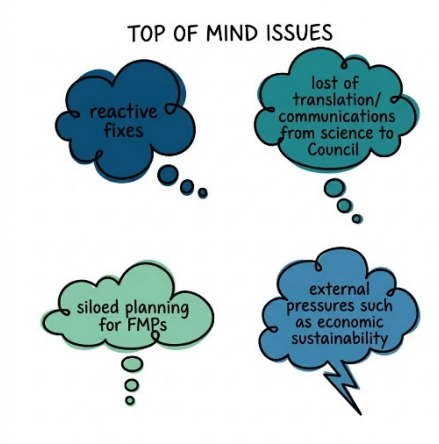
On January 6-7, 2026, the Council convened a strategic planning workshop in Boston, Massachusetts. The session brought together voting and non-voting Council members, key staff, and select external partners (e.g., NOAA Fisheries personnel) to launch the development of the region's first HSP. An experienced facilitator, supported by the Project Team, led the 1.5-day intensive, closed session.

Workshop Overview

The Project Team and the Council staff designed the workshop to support the participants in building consensus on realistic, actionable priorities stemming from challenges and successes identified during the preceding discovery and gap analyses presented to the Council in December 2025. Workshop participants utilized those insights to collaboratively develop a draft strategic framework considering the current and likely near-term states of the region's fisheries and associated management realities. Participants grounded their discussions in several realistic assumptions, including that available funding and resources were not expected to grow, stock assessments might become less frequent and more uncertain, and the Council would increasingly need to rely on alternative science and management approaches to fulfill its core responsibilities.

Top of Mind Issues

At the outset of the workshop, participants generated a list of "Top of Mind" issues associated with the Council's management responsibilities and approaches. The Project Team noted that many of the concerns were consistent with the findings of the discovery and gap analyses. We grouped these issues into five general areas:



- **Operational Capacity and Process Agility**: There was agreement that human and temporal resources are being pushed to their limit, creating an atmosphere that favors reactive fixes over proactive planning. Participants expressed a need for streamlined briefing materials to improve meeting preparation and called for structural improvements to bridge the gap between scientific assessments and management actions.
- **Science Integration and Data Integrity**: Concerns were raised regarding the transfer of science from NMFS to the Council. Participants emphasized the need to ground-truth data with the empirical observations from fishermen and to modernize assessments by integrating ecosystem-based realities rather than relying on data for which current cycles often result in delays between collection and management decision-making.
- **Stakeholder Engagement and Representation**: A growing disconnect exists between the Council and the fishing community, marked by a sentiment that smaller fishers and new voices are being sidelined. Workshop participants noted that a lack of clear communication and outreach tools has led to a loss of engagement even among veteran participants.
- **Strategic Management and Regulatory Complexity**: Current FMPs were described as overly complex and micromanaged. There was a strong desire to move away from rigid, siloed

planning toward a model where all actions are tied to central strategic goals and clear metrics for success.

- **External Pressures and Economic Sustainability**: The Council is increasingly struggling with forces beyond its direct control, such as the politicization of management and the high economic barriers facing an aging fleet. Participants highlighted the rising competition for ocean space and the urgent need to account for the true economic impact of management decisions on the sustainability of the industry.

Workshop Outcomes

To anchor its new strategic framework, the Council reviewed and refined its mission statement, incorporating specific language from the MSA to more explicitly reflect its primary conservation and management mandates. Participants also developed two complementary vision statements designed to guide the organization over the next decade; one statement focused on the Council's internal role as a trusted, effective, and transparent management body, while the other described an aspirational future for the marine ecosystem and New England's fisheries.

Workshop participants successfully built consensus on four core strategic goals designed to address both near-term needs (i.e., over the next 1-2 years) and long-term objectives (i.e., for 5+ years). These drafted goals included: (1) building flexibility and adaptability into FMPs to better respond to climate-driven shifts; (2) strengthening partnerships between science, management, and industry to rebuild trust; (3) improving the accessibility and use of data to support more responsive, real-time decision-making; and (4) optimizing fleet capacity relative to available fishery resources.

By the conclusion of the workshop, the group had identified some preliminary key performance indicators (KPIs) as a starting point to ensure long-term accountability and track progress against these new goals. The collaborative workshop left participants with concrete goals, objectives, and potential strategies as well as a shared sense of optimism for change. This information was used to begin the development of a holistic strategic plan.

4 Strategic Plan Summary

Our Team worked with the Council's OST and key NEFMC staff, including the Executive Director to enhance what the workshop participants started. Here, we summarize the current working draft of the Council's strategic plan, developed during and following the January Strategic Planning Workshop. The full text of the working draft of the plan can be found in Appendix D. The Council will present the draft plan to the public during its April 2026 Council meeting in Portland, ME. The Council intends to finalize the plan in September 2026.

Overview

Ultimately, the final strategic plan developed and implemented by the Council will help rebuild trust with stakeholders, strengthen partnerships, and enable new approaches towards strengthening New England fisheries. From shifts in fish stock productivity and distributions to fluctuating staffing and budgetary resources, the Council and its staff anticipate a growing need to transition to adaptive and forward-looking management framework to ensure resilient and responsive fishery management in New England. This strategic plan is intended to guide the Council and the New England region towards more adaptive management and sustainable fisheries over the next 10 years.

The strategic plan assumes that the MSA will remain largely unchanged for the foreseeable future, existing partnerships with external agencies and collaborators will continue undisrupted, and the resources and staffing capacity available to the Council will not increase. The Council also anticipates a reduction in the frequency of future stock assessments, and that the managed species and their respective FMPs may be reorganized. Achieving the Council's strategic objectives will likely require alternative and novel scientific and management approaches.

The strategic plan is oriented around the four core strategic goals identified in the January Strategic Planning Workshop and relies on KPIs identified during the workshop to ensure that progress towards each objective is tracked by a clear and measurable standard. The team outlined several strategies and implementation pathways for pursuing each of the plan's outlined strategic goals and objectives.

The Council and their fishery management process, plans, and responsibilities are rooted in the MSA, and the strategic plan utilizes and relies on the following language taken directly from the MSA. The specific MSA language referenced can be found in Appendix E.

Vision and Mission Statements

The Council created two vision statements and a mission statement 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 E for more details.

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.*"

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*."

Guiding Principles and Strategic Goals

These guiding principles represent the Council's shared values and serve to demonstrate how the Council will work to execute and achieve the four strategic goals identified by the Council as core priorities for the near future.

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.

Strategic Goals

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

- 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.

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

- 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.

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

- 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.

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

- 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.

Connecting Key Findings and Gaps to the Strategic Plan

Table 1 below illustrates the alignment between the Discovery and Gap Analyses and the Council's Strategic Plan. It demonstrates how identified challenges and system-level drivers directly inform the development of strategic goals, strategies, and actions, ensuring that the plan is grounded in evidence and designed to address root causes rather than symptoms. Please note this is not an exhaustive list of all the strategies and actions proposed in the working draft of the Holistic Strategic Plan in Appendix A.

Table 1. Strategic Alignment Matrix mapping identified organizational gaps to the Council's goals, strategies, and specific implementation actions.

Discovery / Key Finding	Underlying Gap or Driver	Strategic Goal	Strategy	Aligned Strategy Actions
Council processes are complex, slow, and reactive	Lack of mechanisms to prioritize long-term strategy over short-term demands	Goal 1. Build flexibility and adaptability into FMPs	Introduce forward-looking, adaptive management frameworks	Identify objectives to inform priority activities; Build consensus to prioritize top management needs
Management actions lag behind ecosystem changes	Rigid FMP structures and slow processes	Goal 1. Build flexibility and adaptability into FMPs	Enable more responsive management	Develop triggers/thresholds in harvest control rules; Define criteria for near real-time management reactions
Stakeholder trust is low; engagement feels procedural	Weak feedback loops and limited transparency	Goal 2. Grow & Strengthen partnerships between science, management, and industry	Improve transparency and engagement processes	Develop protocols for technology and social media outreach; Develop engagement and retention strategies
Scientific information is not clearly communicated	Poor communication of uncertainty and limited integration	Goal 2. Grow & Strengthen partnerships between science, management, and industry	Enhance science communication	Foster routine interactions between scientists and fishermen; Host joint and multi-user meetings
Smaller stakeholders underrepresented	Engagement structures favor well-resourced participants	Goal 2. Grow & Strengthen partnerships between science, management, and industry	Broaden stakeholder engagement	Develop structured programs for stakeholder input; Facilitate training and participation opportunities
Data systems are fragmented	Limited integration of ecological, economic, and social data	Goal 3. Improve accessibility and use of data	Modernize and integrate data systems	Identify existing regional data resources; Strengthen partnerships for data collection
Staff are overburdened	Operational demands exceed workforce capacity	Goal 3. Improve accessibility and use of data	Streamline processes and expand capacity	Use AI/automation tools where applicable; Focus meeting materials to target audiences
Fleet capacity misaligned	Lack of alignment with ecosystem conditions	Goal 4. Optimize fleet capacity	Align fleet structure with resources	Establish regional working group and listening sessions; Utilize vessel baseline restriction evaluation

5 Implementation of the Holistic Strategic Plan

Achieving the Council's mission and vision requires a clear and coordinated implementation approach that aligns with the goals and objectives defined in its strategic plan. After finalization, the Council will need to translate the plan into action through strategies and actions, with detailed timelines and identification of responsible individuals/organizations. These in turn will have to be explicitly connected to Council budgeting (see Annual Priority Alignment below). The strategic plan is only as effective as its execution. Measuring progress towards the Council's four strategic goals is an important step that will require periodic internal reviews and briefings with the full Council to evaluate progress and ensure that limited resources remain focused on the most impactful priorities. The Team encourages the Council to utilize a series of preliminary Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to serve as essential benchmarks, bridging the gap between planning and performance. By integrating these or similar KPIs into the Council's standard workflow, leadership can transparently and objectively monitor the efficacy of the management system and its responsiveness to the New England fishing community.

This section outlines the framework for translating the Council's strategic goals into an executable process, providing tools for managing stakeholder engagement, tracking progress, allocating resources, and maintaining transparency for stakeholders. The Council should 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.

Plan and Define Strategic Initiatives and Actions

To move from a reactive to a resilient state, the Council's strategic plan must be treated as a core organizational priority. The Council should use its strategic goals to inform its annual priority-setting process to ensure that long-term objectives coincide with established priorities rather than compete with them.

After the Council establishes its goals, objectives, strategies, and actions, the next step will be to evaluate any current actions under development (i.e., items currently moving through the council process) through the lens of the prioritized strategies. The strategies and actions within the strategic plan should also be applied, where appropriate, to actions identified through the Council's existing 2026 Priority List sourced from the April 2026 NEFMC Council meeting materials. To start this process, the Council and its staff should examine which action items align well with their goals and objectives (and which do not) to ensure activities remain tied to the strategic plan. The next step will be to establish expected outcomes, accountable owners, and the required resources that will support them. However, the result may also require the removal of some actions to ensure objectives are being met and there is sufficient capacity to handle the workload.

Annual Priority Alignment

Each year, Council staff should demonstrate how their 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 supporting resource allocation. It is critical that the Council represent staff considerations accurately to ensure

that the exercise of creating annual strategic initiatives is not simply added to already constrained staff capacity. The Council could consider a "one-in, one-out" approach to managing strategic actions and efforts. Meaning for every action completed only one action could be added to the process. However, at the outset it may be that the Council needs to start with a very strict prioritization of "one-in after two out". Doing so would support the notion that the Council treats strategic efforts as worthwhile investments of time and resources that leadership prioritizes but allows room for "crisis actions" or innovation to implement process-efficiency actions or other items to improve the Council process. As the Council achieves its strategic goals, it should address bottlenecks, resource and time intensive processes, and other constraints on staff time; this would effectively create an upward cycle where work on strategic activities leads to a reduction in workload in other areas, which the Council can use in turn to further other strategic activities.

Assess Progress with Periodic Reviews and Reports

The Council's Executive Director and its Executive Committee should conduct periodic reviews to (1) monitor the amount of time allocated to strategic initiatives, (2) assess progress toward strategic targets, (3) identify risks, impediments, and blockers, and (4) identify and recommend adjustments to its approaches. As the Council is already constrained by operational responsibilities, creating additional data and research-intensive deliverables would be antithetical to the overall success of the strategic plan. Instead, the Council should incorporate tools to conduct periodic reviews into its meetings as discussion items to ensure accountability. Occasionally, there will be no progress to report, but maintaining these elements as standing items in Council agendas will ensure they are consistently discussed. If recurring patterns of little or no progress on strategic efforts emerge, the Council should reprioritize. Related reports at meetings of the Council and its advisory bodies should avoid being overly formal or requiring substantial effort.

Adaptive Mid-Cycle Adjustments

To remain agile and flexible to changing conditions, the Council should consider predictive triggers that allow for mid-cycle adjustments. The Council can make these adjustments when specific conditions are met or actions occur. For example, when:

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

Such occurrences should trigger an adaptive response by the Council, and these responses should be pre-determined wherever possible to avoid reactionary action. However, given the variable nature of Council's work, some adjustments will not lend themselves to a predictive trigger-response model, and the Council will need to exercise expert judgement when and where to leverage this approach.

The Council must document and formally review adaptive adjustments to maintain transparency and governance oversight. Doing so will provide the Council with a very useful organizational asset. After sufficient time has passed, the Council can evaluate the record of adaptive adjustments to identify recurring conditions or root causes. In turn, the Council can address these conditions or causes by developing subsequent strategic initiatives. The documentation of the adaptive responses will allow the Council to continue iteratively refining its approach and develop new strategic initiatives in years to come.

Governance and Accountability Structure

Effective implementation of the strategic plan requires clear governance structures and well-defined accountability to ensure disciplined execution and informed decision making. The Council maintains a robust governance structure for its operations and staff. As such, the strategic plan simply needs to align with this existing structure. As for all Council initiatives, the strategic plan requires oversight, decision rights, and escalation pathways, as well as clearly defined roles and responsibilities across leadership, management, and staff. We provide an example of a RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) in Table 2 to offer possible structures for ownership of strategic initiatives and key actions. Mapping these roles helps to reduce ambiguity, strengthen coordination, and ensure that accountability for results is shared, transparent, and consistently applied throughout implementation.

Table 2. Sample RACI matrix to support governance and accountability of the Council's holistic strategic plan

Key Activities / Decisions	Council	Executive Director	Executive Committee	Committee / PDT Leads
Approve strategic priorities and long-term outcomes	A	R	C	I
Approve HSP and major course corrections	A	R	C	I
Align resources (budget, staffing, capacity) to strategies	I	A/R	C	C
Establish implementation governance and reporting cadence	C	A	R	I
Translate strategy into initiatives and work plans	I	A	C	R
Execute initiatives and deliver milestones	I	C	I	A/R
Monitor progress against KPIs	I	A	R	R
Identify, manage, and escalate risks and issues	I	A	R	R
Conduct quarterly performance and implementation reviews	A	R	R	C
Recommend adjustments to initiatives or timelines	C	A	R	R
Communicate progress and outcomes to stakeholders	I	A	C	R

Legend: **R (Responsible):** Performs the work; **A (Accountable):** Final decision authority and ownership; **C (Consulted):** Provides input and expertise; **I (Informed):** Kept apprised of progress and decisions.

Strategic Roadmap

Here, we provide a draft roadmap to implement the Council's goals and objectives as a possible means for organizing support activities in five sequential phases: Foundation, Launch, Build, Expand, and Sustain (Figure 1). This draft roadmap draws from the full breadth of goals and supporting actions within the working draft of the Council's strategic plan and reflects an integrated view of how the Council may sequence and prioritize its work across the four identified strategic goals. It also incorporates and visually represents several cross-cutting implementation and accountability activities that support the overarching strategic plan in lieu of a single goal.

We intend that the Council use the milestones, activities, and phases depicted in this roadmap as a starting point rather than a fixed plan. Council leadership should revisit and adjust timelines and sequencing as it finalizes organizational strategic priorities. The Council should remain flexible enough to accommodate emerging risks, opportunities, and operational realities. We designed the roadmap to be a living framework that provides strategic direction and coherence while affording the Council the adaptability it needs to respond effectively over time. Additionally, the Team compiled resources to support accountability efforts such that the strategic plan should not serve

as a tracker for strategic actions, but rather as a way to visualize the Council's transformation over the coming decade.

Engaging Stakeholders

Successful implementation of the Council's strategic plan also depends on early and ongoing engagement of internal and external stakeholders. The Council will need to identify key external stakeholders (e.g., science partners, joint managers) for each initiative and define stakeholder roles and engagement approaches. Engaging stakeholders in a deliberate manner provides the Council with more control in reducing misconceptions, establishing expectations, and monitoring involvement. The Project Team developed a stakeholder matrix to generally describe key groups that participate in the Council process or monitor Council action items (Figure 2). The stakeholders' level of influence, involvement, or interest in the Council process may vary (Figure 3). This example matrix allows staff to develop strategies for the types of management, collaboration, and engagement necessary to foster accountability and shared ownership of the strategic plan goals and activities.

Communication Management Before and During Implementation

Relatedly, a structured communication plan supports clarity, alignment, and consistency. The Council should develop a plan that identifies its communication methods, channels, and frequency. Utilizing interactive communications that are multi-directional is appropriate, but the Council should not exclusively default to these means. Doing so, even subconsciously, reinforces a mentality where process participants only prioritize the Council's work immediately prior to or during meetings. Using push (i.e., one-way outbound, such as email) or pull messaging (i.e. one-way inbound, where users seek announcements on websites, dashboards, or shared files) to explain the key actions and expected benefits will keep stakeholders informed and motivated. Effective communication can involve providing progress updates, reinforcing priorities, emphasizing early wins, and addressing risks or changes as they emerge. A critical component to the communication plan will be to address the means and style of communicating science and potential management outcomes to diverse audiences (e.g., how the Council summarizes information in documents that describe actions and outcomes quickly and succinctly).

Figure 2. Suggested implementation roadmap for the Council's strategic plan comprising five phases

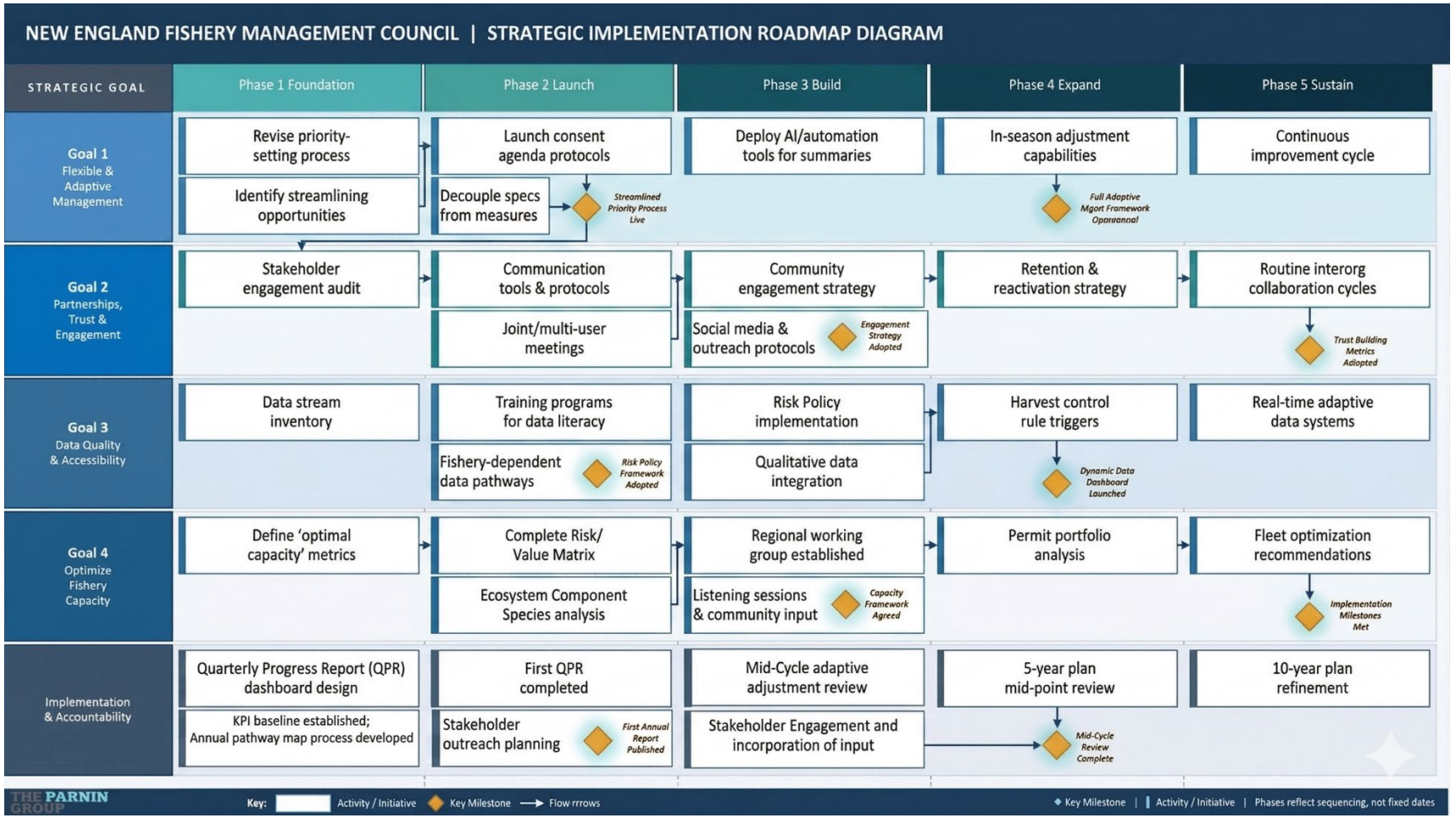
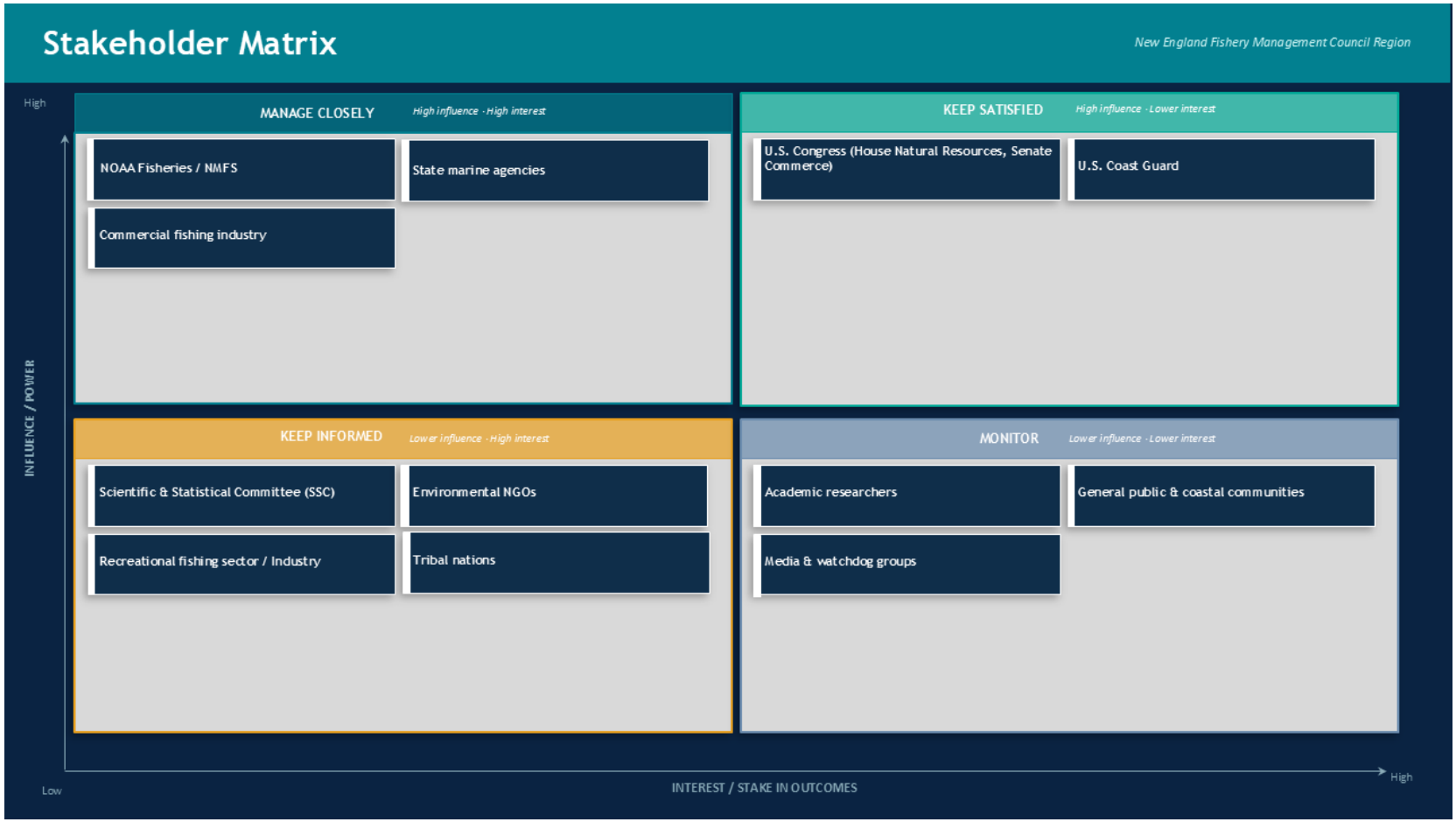


Figure 3. Suggested stakeholder engagement matrix



Key Performance Indicators

After the Council finalizes its strategic plan, it must agree on success metrics to monitor performance toward the goals and objectives of the plan. The Council should track progress in documents such as annual or periodic progress reports (e.g., during each Council planning session). The Team developed draft KPIs for each of the Council's four goals as examples for the types of metrics that could help the Council assess progress, monitor improvement, and evaluate the effectiveness of future activities. Implemented appropriately, KPIs should help the Council decide if an activity meets its goal or if the activity requires revision.

To guide conversations during the progress report review sessions, we recommend the Council develop a tracking system to maintain control and awareness of its actions. Action monitoring may seem tedious at first, but it is essential to managing and executing the strategic plan. Effective monitoring approaches serve as living management tools and one-stop shops that define specific initiatives, actions, owners, timelines, and resources required to achieve the Council's strategic goals, while simultaneously coordinating efforts to monitor progress, evaluate risks, and measure results. By implementing the tracker, the Council can translate the strategic plan into a more concrete and structured list of activities to manage and evaluate.

The Team provided a detailed tracker to the NEFMC Executive Director as a separate addendum to this report. However, here we provide a general example to illustrate how strategic actions can be monitored for success, incorporating some example KPIs (Table 3).

Table 3. Example of a strategic plan tracking sheet.

NEFMC Strategic Plan | Dashboard								
	Strategic Goal	**Priority**	**Status**	**Lead / Owner**	**Target Date**	**Last Updated**	**KPIs**	**Notes / Recent Progress**
Goal 1: Build Flexibility & Adaptability into FMPs and Streamline Management Processes								
1.1	Revise the Annual Priority Setting Process							
1.2	Reduce Redundancy in Information Sharing Throughout Action Development							
1.3	Set Specifications Through Streamlined Processes, Decoupled from Other Measures							
1.4	Focus Analyses and Documentation on Identified Action Objectives							
Goal 2: Grow and Strengthen Partnerships Between Science, Management, and Fishing Communities								
2.1	Develop Communication Tools and Practices for Accessible Information Sharing							
2.2	Increase Opportunities for Stakeholder Input to the Scientific Process							
2.3	Align Science Priority Topics with Management and Fishing Industry Objectives							
Goal 3: Improve Accessibility, Quality, and Use of Data to Inform Decisions								
3.1	Provide & Encourage Opportunities to Teach/Learn About Data Sources and Analyses							

NEFMC Strategic Plan | Dashboard								
	Strategic Goal	**Priority**	**Status**	**Lead / Owner**	**Target Date**	**Last Updated**	**KPIs**	**Notes / Recent Progress**
3.2	Expand Collaborative Pathways for Application of Fishery-Dependent Data							
3.3	Implement a Risk Policy Considering Biological, Environmental & Socioeconomic Factors							
3.4	Streamline Approaches to Incorporate Emergent Information in a Timely Manner							
Goal 4: Optimize Capacity to Reflect Fishery Resources and Improve Fishing Efficiency and Safety								
4.1	Identify Justified Investment Level for All Stocks Across FMPs							
4.2	Consider Capacity Issues in a Piecemeal Approach with Manageable Steps							
4.3	Dedicate Resources to Directly Address Fishery Capacity Issues							

The Council will need to develop, socialize, and refine KPIs and validate them, similar to the stakeholder matrix, RACI matrix, and strategic implementation roadmap as the NEFMC begins strategic plan implementation. A few examples of KPIs as developed by the Project Team are presented in Table 4 through 7 below. In addition, we incorporated some draft KPIs into a draft tracking sheet for Goal 1 (Table 8).

Table 4. Examples of KPIs developed by the Project Team to monitor Council progress under Strategic Goal 1

Goal 1: Build flexibility and adaptability into Fishery Management Plans and streamline the process of developing management measures		
ID	**Example**	**Definition**
KPI 1.1	Timely Action Implementation Percentage	Percentage of Council-approved management actions implemented on or before the first day of the fishing year.
KPI 1.2	Average Time to Adjust Management Measures	Average number of calendar days from formal identification of a management need (e.g., new science, stock status change, fishery disruption) to Council approval of an adjusted management measure.
KPI 1.3	Process Efficiency and Streamlining Index	A composite index tracking year over year improvement across three elements: 1. Reduction in briefing products. 2. Percentage of actions using standardized or AI supported templates/tools. 3. Reduction in average preparation time per action. Each element scored annually and combined into a single index.

Table 5. Examples of KPIs developed by the Project Team to monitor Council progress under Strategic Goal 2

Goal 2: Grow and strengthen partnerships between science, management, and fishing communities		
ID	**Example**	**Definition**
KPI 2.1	Representative Participation Indicator	The extent to which all key user groups are actively involved throughout Council processes. Percentage of Council actions, science products, or management initiatives that include documented participation from all identified user groups (e.g., scientists, managers, commercial fishermen, recreational fishermen, NGOs, others as defined by the Council).
KPI 2.2	Decision Relevant Communication	How well scientific and management information is communicated in a clear, professional, and usable way for decision-making. Stakeholder feedback via 1-2 questions following meetings:

Goal 2: Grow and strengthen partnerships between science, management, and fishing communities		
ID	**Example**	**Definition**
	Effectiveness Score	1. Clarity of scientific information. 2. Relevance to management decisions. 3. Transparency of assumptions and uncertainty.
KPI 2.3	Cross Group Collaboration Index	The degree to which science, management, and fishing communities are meaningfully connected in developing products and decisions. Percentage of science and management products that are: 1. Co-developed, reviewed, or formally informed by multiple user groups, and; 2. Include documented feedback loops (e.g., workshops, advisory panels, joint reviews). 3. Increase in the number of jointly managed meetings.

Table 6. Examples of KPIs developed by the Project Team to monitor Council progress under Strategic Goal 3

Goal 3: Improve accessibility, quality, and use of data to inform decisions		
ID	**Name**	**Definition**
KPI 3.1	Decision-Ready Data Understanding Score	The extent that Council members and stakeholders understand data sources, methods, and implications well enough to support decisions. Stakeholder feedback via 1-2 questions following meetings: 1. Data collection methods. 2. Analytical tools and assumptions. 3. Interpretation of results and uncertainty.
KPI 3.2	Integrated Data Use Rate in Management Recommendations	How effectively quantitative, qualitative, and socioeconomic data are incorporated into Council decision-making. Percentage of management recommendations that explicitly document consideration of: 1. Quantitative biological data. 2. Qualitative or experiential information. 3. Socioeconomic data. 4. Application of the Council's Risk Policy (where applicable).

Table 7. Examples of KPIs developed by the Project Team to monitor Council progress under Strategic Goal 4

Goal 4: Optimize capacity to reflect fishery resources and improve fishing efficiency and safety		
ID	**Name**	**Definition**
KPI 4.1	Defined and Adopted Optimal Capacity Coverage	Measures progress in defining and agreeing on "optimal capacity" across fisheries and management plans. Percentage of Fishery Management Plans (or priority fishery components) with a Council-approved definition of optimal capacity and associated capacity metrics (e.g., fleet size, vessel characteristics, processing or labor capacity). Number of FMPs/components with adopted optimal capacity metrics ÷ Total number of FMPs.
KPI 4.2	Stakeholder Consensus on Capacity-Related Objectives	Measures progress toward building majority agreement regarding fleet, community, and access objectives. Percentage of capacity-related management actions or policy initiatives where documented consensus (or majority agreement) is achieved among key stakeholder groups, as reflected in advisory panel recommendations, public comments, or formal Council votes.

Table 8. Example of KPIs incorporated into a Goal Tracker.

NEFMC Strategic Plan | Goal 1: Build Flexibility & Adaptability into FMPs and Streamline Management Processes									
OBJECTIVES: • **Optimize Council member, staff, and partner time for the development of actions** • **Refine information streams to avoid duplication and streamline products, including use of AI and automation** • **Support implementation of actions across all plans by the start of the fishing year** • **Increase the ability to adjust management measures in a timely manner**									
Strategy	**Metrics to Track & Performance Indicators**	**KPIs**	**Current KPI**	**Actions**	**Lead / Owner**	**Priority**	**Status**	**Target Date**	**Last Updated**
	Metrics should measure whether the process is actually more coordinated and forward-looking.	Percentage of Council-approved management actions implemented on or before the first day of the fishing year.	(Total Actions Implemented by Day 1/Total Actions Scheduled for that Fishing Year)*100						
Strategy 1.1 Revise the Annual Priority Setting Process				SA 1.1.1 Identify objectives to inform priority activities					
				SA 1.1.1.2 Build consensus to prioritize top management needs					
				SA 1.1.3 Recommend priority activities within realistic capacity parameters, including all partners					

6 Recommendations

The following recommendations are the result of our Team's comprehensive, multi-phased analysis of the Council's operational landscape, designed to bridge the gap between current challenges and a more resilient future. These recommendations were developed by synthesizing the insights of the Discovery Phase with the outcomes of the Gap Analysis and Strategic Planning Workshop. By addressing misalignments in Council processes that impact nimbleness, data integration, and stakeholder trust, these recommendations provide additional, potential approaches to optimize the Council's limited resources in fulfilling its statutory mandates under the MSA and supporting New England's fishing communities. These recommendations (Enablers and Opportunities) are in addition to those strategies and action items identified in the working draft of the strategic plan. The Project Team believes these items are critical elements to incorporate into the draft action items under the strategic plan.

We see these items as impactful opportunities that support the Council's strategic planning and prioritization processes. To ensure a cohesive path forward, we aligned our recommendations under each of the Council's strategic goals.

We provide Table 9 to summarize our recommendations to consider as the Council moves toward implementation of the strategic plan and finalizes its actions to support its goals and objectives. The details of these recommendations are also provided.

Table 9. Summary of strategic recommendations for Strategic Plan Goals 1-4, mapped to Enablers and Opportunities, including alignment with Governance & Efficiency, Trust & Engagement, Workforce & Resources, and Adaptation & Resilience

	Enablers and Opportunities	Governance & Efficiency	Trust & Engagement	Workforce & Resources	Adaptation & Resilience
SG 1					
Build flexibility and adaptability	Dedicate Council time to evaluate strategic plans and prioritize actions.	✓	✓		
	Integrate annual work plans with NMFS to right-size capacity	✓			✓
	Use triggers/accountability measures for automatic ACL adjustments	✓		✓	
	Implement management triggers for missed stock assessment deadlines.	✓			✓
SG 2					
Grow & Strengthen Partnerships	Create visual maps and "plain language" guides for the engagement process.		✓		
	Publish enhanced decision summaries for all agenda items post-meeting.		✓		
	Use participatory modeling and data workshops to involve industry in science.		✓		
	Conduct concurrent SSC/AP meetings for real-time collaboration.	✓	✓	✓	
	Host port-side fisherman's forums and recruitment initiatives.		✓		✓
SG 3					
Improve Data Quality & Use	Clarify descriptions of scientific uncertainty and risk summaries.		✓		
	Expand cooperative data collection programs (e.g., Study Fleet).		✓		✓
SG 4					
Optimize Capacity & Safety	Realign/confirm FMP goals with the IRA Portfolio and fleet capacity baselines			✓	✓

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

- Dedicate more time during Council meetings to evaluate progress on the strategic plan and prioritization (e.g., do we need to adjust the plan? Are we meeting our goals?).
    - Review all current actions proposed on the Council's prioritization list. Tie any actions back to a central strategic plan; set aside others for now on a separate list. Add in time. Balance actions and time spent per FMP.
    - Using the April 2026 Executive Directors Report and the 2026 Priority list sourced from April 2026 NEFMC Council meeting materials, consider pausing any new action items and/or refraining from adding any items after others are completed. Dedicate time to evaluate and implement the SP. Examine current scope of efforts to incorporate findings of all recent IRA initiatives (i.e., Portfolio management effort, Integrate Ecosystem Considerations, Enhancing Participatory Processes, Finalizing the Council's Risk Policy). See Appendix A for how gaps are tied to IRA initiatives.
- Further integrate annual work plans and prioritization exercises with NMFS to right-size anticipated management efforts with capacity, leaving room for adaptive management
    - Identify routine actions for which more expedited processes can potentially be implemented.
    - Examine the Council's Regional Operating Agreement with NOAA to modify or solidify future responsibilities and expectations for support of strategic plan. Through an addendum document to the ROA, examine responsible parties dedicated and identified to conduct the work and adjust annually in an open forum; this allows for flexible responses to changes in resources (budget and staffing).
- Set up future analyses/options to adjust ACL up or down as needed using accountability measures (under/over adjustments) or a trigger to automatically implement future Specs/ACLs to stabilize fishery for up to 6 years within appropriate management cycles. Consider carry-over provisions for ACL management.
- Set up management response triggers to implement past ACLs/Specifications when stock assessment deadline targets are not met to ensure start of fishery. Adjust ACLs as needed for next management cycle.

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

- In addition to prioritizing plain language summaries to increase understanding and accessibility for fishing communities and the general public:
    - Develop visual maps of Council decision making approaches and/or scientific processes (e.g., stock assessment cycles) to more clearly illustrate where stakeholder and public input can be ingested.
    - Publish a new NEFMC two-page, concise schematic with links to pages "Get Involved" website for the public to understand when and how best to engage in the Council process.
    - After a Council meeting concludes, consider posting an enhanced decision summary document for all agenda items, not just for motions (Final-Motions-to-Council-January-2026.pdf, January 2026 NEFMC Council meeting materials). A similar approach is used in the Pacific Council to communicate actions, decisions, discussions and next steps: March 2026 Decision Summary Document - Pacific Fishery Management Council, March 2026 PFMC Council meeting materials)

- Prioritize data workshops to incorporate empirical perspectives from the fishing industry into the development of science and the application of science during the decision-making process:
    - An example of this type of effort would be "Using participatory conceptual modeling to integrate ecosystem and socioeconomic information into the fisheries stock assessment process: A Gulf of America red snapper case study (Gervasi et al. 2025)". Researchers organized in-person participatory workshops and interviews with 53 fishers (commercial, charter, recreational). Fishers contributed their own observations and system knowledge to build a conceptual model of the fishery. The resulting model was then used to inform stock assessment science.
    - Create memos that show how stakeholder input was incorporated, or not, into science and management with rationale
- Consider conducting concurrent SSC/AP/Committee meetings immediately prior to, or during, Council meetings to collaborate in more real time for in season adjustments options, prioritization of action items, HSP progress check-ins, scoping new actions and discussing cross cutting issues (EFH, marine Spatial Planning, stock assessment results). This fosters more collaboration outside council meeting chambers and during evening discussions to work through challenges and brainstorm ideas/solutions. Creates an adaptive and nimble management environment. A similar model is done at the Pacific Fishery Management Council.
- Consider hosting a fisherman's forum at high-use ports or before a Council meeting so that Council members can engage fisherman. Create incentives (food/giveaways/stipends) to encourage attendance and conduct one or two times per year. Gather input, establish new or reinforce relationships with the industry; use forum to recruit new fisherman into advisory panels, use opportunity to showcase successes; train/educate fisherman in the Council process/how to get involved. The SAMFC started conducting "a new Council initiative aimed toward building relationships with fisheries stakeholders and providing an opportunity for mutual sharing of information" (see SAMFC website Lines of Communication Meetings - South Atlantic Fishery Management Council,).

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

- Improve descriptions regarding the expression of uncertainty and similar scientific terminology that is often misinterpreted (e.g., risk summaries)
    - Clearly identify where uncertainty is accounted for in scientific inputs like stock assessments as well as through management decision making.
- Explore the feasibility of establishing additional cooperative data collection programs (e.g., the Study Fleet Program)

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

- As the Council conducts its examination of the IRA Fishery Portfolio, the Council may need to consider the larger picture of examining current FMP goals and objectives to possibly align them to Goal 4. This could include the development of a new baseline for fleet capacity and then developing new goals and objectives within an FMP that align with proposed actions.

7 Conclusion

The holistic strategic plan marks a pivotal shift for the NEFMC, transitioning the organization from a traditional, reactive model to a forward-looking and resilient framework. By acknowledging that the Council is at an inflection point, this report provides the necessary roadmap to stabilize fisheries management against the overlapping pressures of shits in the ecosystem, regulatory complexity, and resource constraints.

The success of the Council's transformation relies on its ability to operationalize trust through transparent feedback loops and to bridge the gap between scientific assessment and management action. While the project identified significant strain on the Council's workforce, it also revealed a shared sense of optimism and a strong foundation of scientific rigor upon which to build.

Ultimately, the plan is a living management tool. By committing to the four strategic goals and the disciplined use of performance metrics, the Council can ensure that New England's fisheries remain globally competitive, the marine ecosystem remains abundant, and fishing communities remain robust for the next decade and beyond.

Photo source: Adobe stock images

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Appendix A: New England Fishery Management Council Holistic Strategic Plan - Discovery and Gap Analyses

(Provided to the Council in December 2025)

Introduction

Background and Context

The New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC, or the Council) operates in a complex, dynamic, and rapidly changing marine and regulatory environment. Shifts in species distribution, increased variability in stock conditions, and rising uncertainty in both ecological and socioeconomic systems are influencing the Council's decision-making process. At the same time, industry stakeholders, scientists, and the public expect greater transparency, responsiveness, and clarity in how the Council system and agency partners develop and implement management.

Against this contextual backdrop, NEFMC initiated a multi-phase effort in partnership with The Parnin Group and Lynker (the Parnin Team) to assess the Council's current approaches, identify opportunities to strengthen management, and develop a holistic strategic plan for resilient fishery management approaches in the New England region. The effort builds on a significant body of ongoing related work, including NEFMC Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) projects, its Climate and Ecosystem Steering Committee (CESC) process-mapping and communications initiatives, and other related efforts to modernize fisheries management.

Goals and Objectives

This project seeks to:

4. Document existing approaches and processes utilized by the Council, including those used to address unpredictable changes to fishery trends, cycles, and a changing management landscape;
5. Identify key drivers of successful and unsuccessful approaches, and link drivers to existing and alternative processes; and,
6. Develop a holistic strategic plan to guide Council approaches and activities for resilient and responsive fisheries management initiatives.

The overarching objective is to position the Council to make timely, science-based decisions that are durable, agile, equitable, and aligned with emerging environmental and economic realities.

As part of the development of this project, the Council assigned an Oversight Team (OST) to help guide our work. The Parnin Team presented a preliminary Discovery Analysis to the OST on October 16, 2025. Our Team revised the document based on their feedback and then conducted another review with the OST on November 25, 2025. The team provided essential feedback aimed at refining the report's clarity and focus. Based on their feedback, we synthesized the findings into cross-cutting themes, utilized quantitative data to help anchor findings and gaps, and explicitly linked findings and gaps to the Council's IRA initiatives. We also included Council successes, focus group/interview/questionnaire participant details and statistics, executive summaries, and sample success metrics.

Project Progress

The project is structured into three sequential phases:

Discovery Phase (Complete)

- **Activities**: Gathered insights through interviews, focus groups, advisory group questionnaires, benchmarking, and document review. Conducted SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) and PESTLE (Political, Economic, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental) analyses.
- **Outcomes**: Identified key challenges, captured participant perspectives, and mapped where processes operate efficiently or break down.

The Discovery Phase examined the current state of the Council's fishery management process and related challenges/successes through research and interviews with key staff, leadership, and active participants in the process.

We highlight several overarching "Findings" that currently shape and challenge the Council's organizational operations, efficiencies, and adaptive approaches to management. During this phase, we also distributed online questionnaires to gather insights regarding the Council's advisory bodies with the goal of improving efficiency, efficacy, coordination, and clarity of purpose.

Finally, we began our benchmark analysis, and the preliminary analysis can be found in Appendix B. This analysis is ongoing and will include a high-level comparison of the NEFMC to other U.S. Fishery Management Councils to identify best practices for addressing regulatory and ecosystem challenges through comparative insights on governance, strategic planning, and performance.

Analysis Phase (Current)

- **Activities**: Translating the discovery findings into deeper insights by identifying gaps, including misalignments and root causes.
- **Outcomes**: Diagnosing system-level drivers for identified symptoms and clarifying how different factors shape Council effectiveness.

During this phase, we identify key drivers of inefficiencies and potential improvements from data and information collected in the Discovery phase. We are also linking key drivers to specific challenges and highlighting trends to paint a comprehensive picture of the organization and its processes. This is a critical step in our process; we want to ground truth our findings, drivers, and identification of gaps in critical information needed to conduct the final phase.

Recommendations and Strategic Planning (December 2025-April 2026)

- **Activities**: Conduct additional inquiries, as needed, through a broad participant questionnaire, focus groups/interviews, and Council feedback based on the Gap Analysis. Conduct strategic planning workshop to draft potential plan.
- **Outcomes**: Final report on recommended changes, strategic plan, and roadmap for implementation.

The Recommendation Phase of the project will begin with the development of draft, actionable recommendations that can enhance the Council's resilient and responsive fisheries management process as well as inform the development of its strategic plan. In December 2025, based on feedback from additional data collection and feedback, we will begin formulating draft recommendations in preparation of the January 2026 strategic planning workshop with Council members.

Following the workshop, the refinement of the draft plan will include additional reviews and feedback from the Council members and the OST. By April 1, 2026, the Parnin Team will provide the Council with a final report and a draft Strategic Plan, including an implementation roadmap and associated performance metrics. We note that the Council will finalize and implement the plan as desired.

Discovery Analysis

Overview

The Discovery Phase drew from multiple inputs, including interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, benchmarking, workflow analysis, document review, and the SWOT and PESTLE analyses. When the Parnin Team synthesized these sources of information, a clear set of patterns emerged across four major topic areas. Although each input described challenges from different perspectives, many underlying themes are consistent across information streams. The findings reflect both participants' experience and the factors driving these experiences. The Analysis Phase will build on the breadth of inputs collected during Discovery.

Sources of Input:

- **Interviews** and **focus groups** with Council members, staff, Plan Development Teams (PDTs), Advisory Panel (AP) members, Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) members, Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO), Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) personnel, industry representatives, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), and partner agencies.
- Advisory Body **questionnaire** responses (NEFMC Staff and AB Chairs/Vice Chairs).
- **Document** and **policy reviews**, including Council meeting materials, technical documents, and regulatory deadlines.
- Alignment with **parallel initiatives**, such as IRA.
- **Benchmarking** data, providing comparative insights on staffing levels, budgets, governance structures, and process timelines across regional councils (see Appendix B).
- Current **written approaches and processes** to document and implement changes in response to unpredictable fishery trends, cycles, and the evolving management landscape.

Table 10 lists the number of participants in interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires, categorized by the groups they represent in the Council process.

Table 10. Number and type of respondent to interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires

Role	Number of Respondents
Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission	1
Climate and Ecosystem Steering Committee	7
NEFMC Council Staff	20
Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office	6
Fishing Industry	17
Council and NOAA Leadership	10
Northeast Fisheries Science Center	9
Non-government Organizations	10
Scientific and Statistical Committee	4
State Government	2
Unknown (Questionnaire)	5
Grand Total	78 (individuals)

*Please note that some individuals serve multiple roles, therefore the total number of respondents in a category is not equal to the grand total.

Grounding Our Findings

To ensure accuracy and transparency, the Parnin Team highlights patterns that appear across inputs and supports findings with relevant examples or specific data points. Benchmarking data are incorporated to reinforce or clarify emerging themes, while divergent perspectives are noted along with contributing factors to ensure a balanced view.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to Discovery, including that some participant groups were underrepresented in the process due to scheduling constraints and varying levels of voluntary participation, such as SSC members, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) staff of Protected Resource Division, and Habitat and Ecosystem Services Divisions (due to shut down). Furthermore, benchmarking data that was publicly available was inconsistent across peer Regional Fishery Management Councils and their respective Fishery Management Plans (FMPs), which limited the ability to make a fully comparable assessment.

Discovery Findings

- When analyzed holistically, data collected during the Discovery Phase cluster into four cross-cutting topics that characterize the Council's current state:
- **Governance & Efficiency**: The findings related to Council decision-making architecture, prioritization, and workflow complexity.

- **Trust & Engagement**: Findings related to transparency, feedback loops, and representation that may undermine or reinforce participant confidence and engagement.
- **Workforce & Resources**: Capacity and resource limitations that burden staff, restrict innovation, and delay strategic progress.
- **Adaptation & Resilience**: Findings related to the system's ability to anticipate and respond to shifts due to data cycles and required processes.

The following sections summarize the themes and patterns that emerged from interviews, focus groups, and questionnaire input during Discovery. The overall system seems to be structurally overburdened and operationally reactive. While there is a desire for high-quality, science-based management, the actual mechanics of the Council management process are hindered by structural and workflow complexity, resource scarcity, and a growing disconnect between participants and decision-makers. This causes challenges in being adaptive and resilient to outside influences that disrupt the management process.

Figure 4 illustrates the total number of mentions for each topic area, segmented by data sources (interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires).

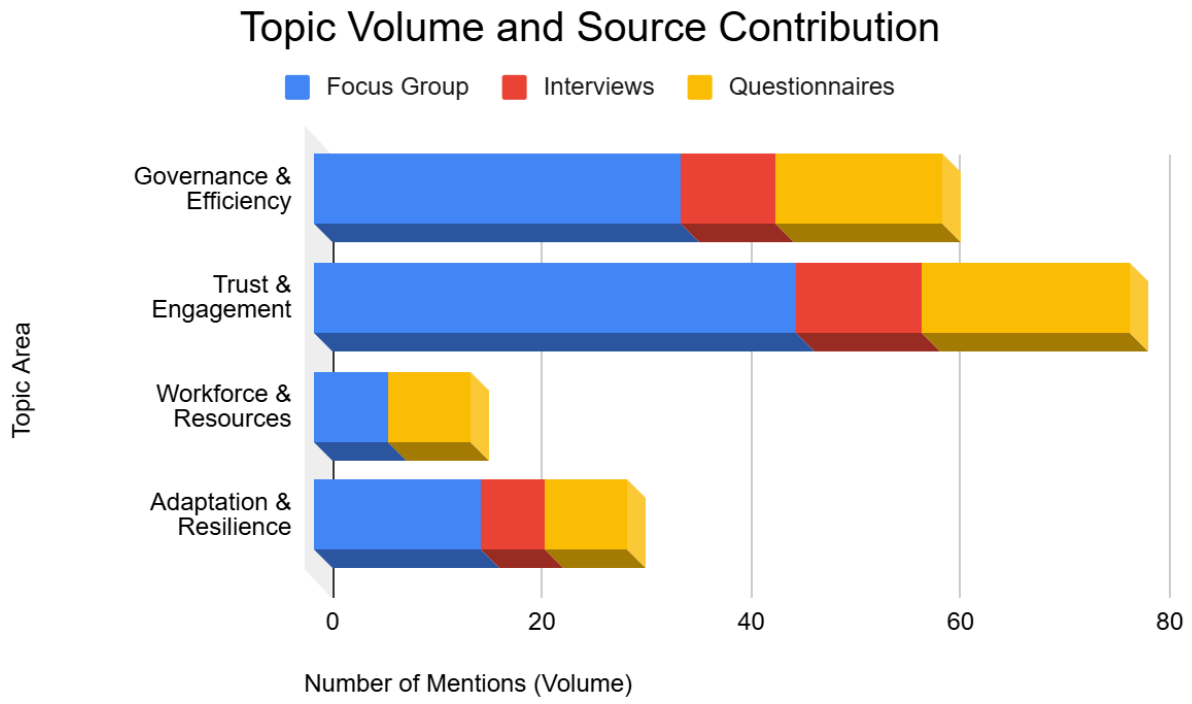


Figure 4. Volume and source of statements that supported main topics areas of Governance & Efficiency, Trust & Engagement, Workforce & Resources, and Adaptation & Resilience

Table 11 outlines a hierarchy of concerns, identifying the dominant feedback channels and primary insights for each topic. Topic areas were priority-ranked based on the volume of comments that pertained to a topic area. Although dominant sources were identified, these insights were identified across multiple data collection sources (interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires).

Table 11. Prioritization of Key Topic Areas by Feedback Volume and Source

Topic Area	Overall Priority (by Volume)	Dominant Source of Feedback	Primary Insight
Trust & Engagement	Highest Priority	Focus Group	Feedback is driven primarily by direct participant/stakeholder input, indicating widespread, ground-level concern.
Governance & Efficiency	Second Highest Priority	Focus Group	A significant and broad concern, with Focus Groups providing the clearest, most detailed direction on structural and process improvements.
Adaptation & Resilience	Third Highest Priority	Focus Group	Feedback volume is moderate, but the mix includes significant input from both Interviews and Questionnaires.
Workforce & Resources	Lowest Priority	Focus Group & Questionnaires	The lowest-volume topic, with its input primarily coming from written submissions (Questionnaires), supplemented by input from Focus Groups.

Governance & Efficiency

Governance & Efficiency challenges are primarily related to the architecture of the process and how the Council establishes priorities. Challenges stem from structural constraints (e.g., statutory mandates) and overlaps that accumulate across steps in processes. Respondents consistently describe a system that is participatory but complex, lacking nimbleness in areas, and difficult to navigate at times. High-level findings from interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires are described below.

Challenges to efficient decision-making vary.

- The organizational structure, particularly its effective committee system and bottom-up, grassroots approach (utilizing Advisory Panels, Plan Development Teams, and the SSC), is highlighted as a successful way to facilitate detailed decision-making and ensure a wide range of input.
- The process is noted for numerous opportunities for public comment and engagement in the process.
- PDTs are praised for acting as effective intermediaries, which enhances the quality of recommendations and incorporates Council risk policies earlier in the management process. The memos they produce are described as extremely helpful for Council members.
- Most advisory bodies are described as well-balanced, representative, and successful at including a broad range of stakeholders across different geographic areas and industry sectors.

- Council and science center leadership are actively working to make requests clearer and define a process for who receives requests (e.g., through supervisors) to better manage staff workloads. This effort is described as "a work that is in progress" and "positive".
- Participants cited that there are unclear hand-offs or defined ownership of a task or action item within and between certain groups which leads to delays and creates a sense that no one is “officially tasked” to support management actions. This leads to a system where accountability for timeliness is spread over many people, often leading to inefficiency and inaction.
- At times, issues being scoped for action circulate across advisory bodies and into the Council forum then back to advisory bodies without resolution.
- A lack of an educational component between the Council process and the managed fisheries can lead to misinformation, complicating the Council's ability to identify and develop management solutions for true risks.
- A structural disconnect exists between scientific production and policy application. This misalignment creates a translation gap, where raw scientific outputs are often incompatible with management realities, rendering them difficult for the Council or participants to interpret or utilize effectively.
- Specific challenges were identified in the internal agency review, where the lack of clear coordination between the regional office (GARFO) and the Science Center led to a complex process for obtaining various reviews (e.g., economic, social science) from different staff members for each action.
- At times requests for information and guidance from the council or plan development teams to science staff are often "not clear" and lack specific purpose or timelines.
- Issues being scoped for action circulate across advisory bodies and into the Council forum then back to advisory bodies without resolution.

Procedural steps require significant time and attention.

- Stakeholders appreciate that the Council’s regulatory process reflects a genuine commitment to scientific rigor and public transparency, indicating strength in the governance process even though burden is high.
- The herring fishery's use of non-discretionary, trigger-based quota adjustments is cited as a successful model for an efficient, automatic regulatory response that increases predictability for the industry.
- The scallop survey system is considered one of the best in the world due to collaboration between multiple groups, consistent communication, and the use of different sampling tools to ensure the entire survey area is covered annually.
- The sheer volume of management alternatives and the multi-layered nature of the review process create a system that is difficult to navigate.
- Decision-making for regulatory actions is described as "labor intensive and demanding in short windows.”
- The time it takes for the NEFSC to run key analyses, such as a management track assessment, is too long and minor delays in data can throw off the action timeline. The volume of mandated actions prevents the Council from experimenting with adaptive management frameworks or utilizing expedited legal reviews.
- Rigid statutory requirements prolong delays, preventing participants from seeing meaningful movement in the short term. This causes process fatigue, inhibits ongoing engagement, and ultimately prevents stakeholders from feeling collective ownership over outcomes.

- The review and approval process after the Council's final action often introduces delays, unexpected hurdles, and inconsistency in decision-making at NOAA's regional offices.
- Overly complicated regulations that make adaptation difficult for fishermen.
- The timing of stock assessments and regulatory approvals creates inefficiencies, particularly at the end of the year when multiple actions are submitted simultaneously.
- The regulatory change process is viewed as overly formal and slow, often requiring years to materialize into actionable results.

Priorities shift based on emerging issues and requirements.

- Participants noted a positive shift in recent years toward the Council being more successful in sticking to its long-term priorities, reducing the tendency to frequently change course due to unexpected issues.
- The annual prioritization process is often derailed by "emergency issues" and external pressures, limiting the ability to follow a predictable plan and changing the course of management issues without clear, stable reasoning.
- The strict annual specification process for certain species (like scallops and groundfish) forces "rushed decision-making" due to short windows for data collection and assessment, indicating the process is too rigid to handle the real-world constraints of data and science.

Trust & Engagement

Trust and Engagement challenges are driven by how information moves through the system, how participant input is reflected, and how communication shapes perceptions of the Council's work. Feedback consistently described gaps in transparency, limited feedback loops, and a sense that engagement does not lead to outcomes. In addition, distrust in the system and decision-making hinders meaningful engagement and collaborative governance. Perceived challenges stem from uneven communication paths, representation gaps, and varying experiences across different advisory bodies (e.g., PDTs, APs, Committees). High-level findings from interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires are described below.

Perceptions of representation and participation vary across bodies.

- Critical gaps exist in current body composition, specifically regarding social science, economics, analytical support, and climate expertise. Diverse stakeholder groups, including recreational interests, Indigenous communities, specific industry sectors, and geographically diverse representatives, are frequently absent.
- Concerns exist regarding the objectivity of summary reports when presented to the oversight committee and Council by the Advisory Panel Chair who may hold inherent political biases. Participants suggest that neutral staff members should present summary reports to ensure an accurate depiction of the group's consensus rather than individual viewpoints.
- "Surprise" findings or decisions may foster adversarial relationships between participants and management. Additionally, issues often circulate among different groups without resolution due to a lack of cross-functional collaboration.
- Variable attendance and the infrequency of joint meetings hinder the advancement of cross-cutting issues, preventing the sharing of practical knowledge required to solve complex problems.
- There is noticeable apathy toward engaging in the process and a decline in public meeting attendance due to the perceived inability to enact meaningful change.
- Smaller or newer participants and groups find the process difficult to navigate.

Participants report different experiences with how input is collected and reflected in decisions.

- There is overwhelming respect for and a positive attitude towards Council staff – their collaboration is seen as critical and readily available to all those involved in the process.
- Participants characterize engagement efforts as administrative "box-checking."
- There is a pervasive frustration that despite attending workshops and panels, stakeholders rarely see evidence that their feedback shapes final outcomes. Specifically, APs cite that they are “too late in the process" suggesting that by the time their official feedback is solicited, the main policy direction has already been set, and "Committees often do the real work.”
- Disillusionment towards Committees grows when final management actions routinely diverge from AP consensus/recommendations without clear communication or justification. Some feel that industry representation is rarely given deference, leading to a perception that their input is systematically ignored.
- Declining staff capacity undermines participant trust, as limited resources prevent staff from providing the timely responses or clear explanations necessary to maintain confidence. Participants emphasize the need for plain language explanations and immediate follow-up when feedback is collected.

Perceptions of inclusivity and fairness vary across FMPs.

- A persistent perception exists that larger, high-profile management plans dominate the Council’s time and resources. Participants representing smaller or less prominent fisheries report that their specific needs are deprioritized, leading to calls for a more equitable distribution of attention and scheduling.
- Current engagement structures tend to amplify the voices of well-organized, established groups while marginalizing smaller operators and new entrants. This disparity contributes to the feeling that the system favors those with existing influence rather than fostering broad inclusivity.
- There is a marked contrast in activity levels across different oversight bodies. Members of committees managing smaller plans describe their groups as significantly less active compared to those handling major stocks, creating a "tiered" system of management focus.
- Stakeholders perceive that feedback from fishery-specific participants is often disregarded unless it aligns with the views of environmental or external interest groups.
- Certain bodies are perceived as unbalanced or overly political, leading to skepticism regarding the objectivity of their outputs and the fairness of the resulting management actions.

Collaboration and levels of trust vary across stakeholder groups.

- There is generally strong and effective communication between the Council staff and the Regional Office, which is supported by regular meetings and dedicated staff assignments. There are also strong communications between FMP-specific committees and advisory panels as well as between PDTs and other advisory bodies.
- Staff are looking to be more proactive with communication and outreach. Tools and approaches being discussed include:
    - Developing a strategic approach to public engagement.
    - Leveraging social media and brief video presentations.
    - Creating web forms and interactive approaches to facilitate public comment.
- Although weak or misunderstood communication between the Council and the Science Center has been a source of frustration and inefficiency, the groups have been actively taking steps to strengthen coordination.

- Some industry stakeholders express growing distrust in stock assessments and data accuracy, citing perceived disconnects between scientific models and on-the-water realities, which reduces public buy-in for management decisions.
- A "black box" perception of governance exists where key regulatory decisions are viewed as occurring behind closed doors, potentially undermining the Council's commitment to open governance.
- Some disconnects between the Council and Science Center lead to regulatory delays and surprises, while highly technical presentations are, at times, unsuccessful at translating complex data into actionable policy insights for non-scientific audiences.

Adversarial dynamics and instances of disrespectful behavior within Council forums have degraded the collaborative environment.

Workforce & Resources

Workforce & Resources challenges relate primarily to the capacity and capabilities of staff, availability of technical support, and the tools needed to manage expanding expectations. Respondents consistently described a dedicated workforce operating under strain with limited resources to support ongoing obligations and emerging needs. Challenges may stem from resource constraints, rising analytical demands, and systems that increase administrative burden. High-level findings from interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires are described below.

Staff capacity is shaped by statutory and analytical demands.

- Despite a heavy workload, staff are motivated to thoroughly analyze the issues within the allotted timeframe and to support the Council in making informed decisions.
- Council staff are considered accessible and collaborative.
- NOAA and Council staff are overburdened by rigid procedures and review requirements for analytical document development and a dense schedule of meetings. This heavy workload consumes available bandwidth, leaving virtually no time for strategic planning or process innovation.
- The sheer volume of required analysis, documentation, and advisory activity exceeds current organizational capacity, leading to delays in action development and preventing the streamlining of operations.

Adaptation & Resilience

Adaptation & Resilience challenges center on the ability to respond to environmental, ecological, economic, and other changes at the pace required. Inputs consistently described a management process that struggles to adjust quickly to shifting conditions and priorities due to long data cycles, fragmented information, and limited flexibility. Challenges step from lagging inputs, slow timelines, and constraints in current management tools. High-level findings are outlined below.

Policy timelines progress at a different pace than environmental shifts.

- Council leadership is actively trying to structure the council to be more forward-thinking, addressing the resiliency of the fishery and managing for the fishery that exists today.
- Ecosystem shifts are outpacing management cycles. There is often a three-to-four-year lag between observation and regulation, meaning decisions are implemented based on conditions that no longer exist.
- The timing of stock assessments and regulatory approvals creates end-of-year congestion. These workflow bottlenecks and lengthy agency reviews impede progress, preventing the rapid adjustments required for climate resilience.

- The current regulatory environment provides little room for piloting adaptive frameworks or experimental models, leaving managers without tested alternatives when conditions change abruptly.

Regulatory frameworks and permitting structures define the boundaries of operational flexibility.

- Stakeholders express optimism that with thoughtful changes, the permit system could maintain conservation goals while promoting greater mobility.
- The Council system is viewed as having the "building blocks in place for long standing resilient fisheries," and is engaging in efforts to provide greater flexibility, such as thinking about the risk policy framework or revising ground fish ABC control rules, to be adaptive to the current ecosystem and socioeconomic changes
- Management processes remain reactive, focusing on short-term crisis fixes rather than deliberate, long-term reforms. This approach leaves the Council constantly chasing shifting priorities rather than executing a strategic vision.
- The current permit system is viewed as costly, rigid, and complex. This prevents operators from diversifying their business models to target abundant species when their primary stocks shift or decline.
- Industry participants observe abundant species on the water but are legally unable to harvest them due to management provisions rooted in outdated geographic or biological data.
- Overly complex rules and burden-heavy compliance measures limit the industry's ability to adapt dynamically.
- The density of regulations makes it difficult to implement simple, nimble adjustments like in-season rollovers or automatic triggers.

Data availability and timing differ across systems and sources.

- There is a willingness among participants to partner in data collection if feedback is recognized and valued, as seen in Scallop fishery management.
- There is widespread interest in shifting towards a more holistic management approach that integrates environmental, economic, and social factors (i.e., EAFM).
- Existing data systems are fragmented and siloed, preventing efficient cross-agency coordination. Disconnects between science centers and decision-making bodies cause delays, surprises, and inefficiencies in regulatory actions.
- Stock assessment review cycles significantly lag behind real-time conditions. This forces decision-makers to rely on outdated information, reducing confidence in science and leading to wide uncertainty bounds.
- The system currently lacks adequate mechanisms to integrate environmental indicators or "ecosystem scorecards" into standard decision-making, leaving managers without the necessary context to make climate-aware adjustments.

Conclusion of the Discovery Phase

Discovery findings show a system that is highly participatory and scientifically grounded, but it faces increasing demands and expectations as well as growing complexity. While individual challenges vary across fisheries and functions, there are many underlying issues that trace back to misalignments in strategy, structure, systems, and people. Taken together, these findings show a system facing several pressures: increasing complexity, growing expectations from participants, and operational demands that exceed available (and funded) capacity.

Gap Analysis

Purpose and Scope

The Discovery Phase captured a range of perspectives and data that describe symptoms across fisheries, committees, advisory bodies, and other processes. The purpose of the Analysis Phase is to move beyond what was discovered and examine why the system functions as it does.

Specifically, the Gap Analysis aims to:

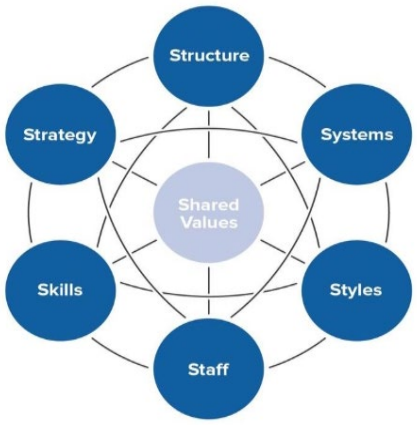
- **Distinguish between symptoms and gaps** (or root causes and misalignments).
- **Integrate discovery inputs** not captured SWOT/PESTLE analyses, such as benchmarking, timeline assessment, and questionnaire results.
- **Identify cross-cutting findings** that may reflect system level issues rather than isolated operational challenges or problems.
- **Diagnose gaps** that lead to challenges in efficiency, trust, responsiveness, and proactive planning across Council operations.
- **Provide the foundation for strategic planning and solutioning** by highlighting potential solutions so that the Council enters the January workshop with a shared understanding of challenges and drivers.

This analysis does not offer final recommendations. Instead, we attempt to create the clarity needed to evaluate tradeoffs, set priorities, and provide supporting information and the potential structure for decision-making leading into the Strategic Planning and Recommendations Phases.

Approach and Methodology

We applied the McKinsey 7-S Framework, which examines how strategy, structure, systems, and people (e.g., staffing, skills, and leadership style) interact within the Council's current operating model. This enables to provide a better understanding of where the gaps are, why they exist, and what drivers reinforce them, enabling the development targeted solutions. The McKinsey 7-S Framework (Figure 5), examines alignment across seven core organizational dimensions:

- **Strategy & Shared Values**: The Council's overarching direction, priorities, and core principles that guide how decisions are made and how tradeoffs are interpreted. This dimension reflects both what the organization aims to achieve and the values that shape its approach to fulfilling its mission.
- **Structure**: The formal roles, responsibilities, and governance models that determine how authority, decision-making, and coordination occur across the Council, Committees, PDTs, staff, and advisory bodies.
- **Systems**: The processes, workflows, tools and technologies, and informal practices through which work is planned, communicated, and conducted across the Council's operations.
- **Staffing, Skills, and (Leadership) Style**: The capacity, capabilities, and leadership behaviors that influence how effectively and efficiently the organization performs its work, including workforce composition, competencies, and dynamics.



The 7-S lens enables us to translate findings into a view of where the Council's current model supports its mission and where gaps hinder it. Gaps may reflect **mandates versus processes, needs versus capacity**, or **expectations versus actual performance**. These gaps often cut across multiple dimensions, reflecting the interconnected nature of governance, workflows, participant engagement processes, and workforce capacity.

Together, the Discovery and Gap Analyses clarify both strengths and areas that may be limiting efficiency, trust, and responsiveness.

Figure 5. McKinsey 7-S Framework

Purpose of Defining Intervention Areas at this Stage

The intervention areas emerging from this analysis serve three core functions:

1. **Provide organized information for strategic planning**
   Rather than approaching strategic planning with a broad list of issues, the Council now has a focused set of intervention areas that reflect cross-cutting challenges, root causes identified in the 7-S analysis, system-level drivers, and areas of misalignment. These provide an outline for discussion, supporting the Strategic Planning Workshop to focus on where strategic choices are needed most.
2. **Establish boundaries of feasible recommendations**
   Some gaps surfaced in the assessment may be structure, where others are operational, relational, or cultural. Identifying these differences can ensure that our recommendations address areas within the Council's control, sequence recommendations appropriately, recognize dependencies, and align interventions with capacity and resources.
3. **Support prioritization and decision-making**
   The potential intervention areas identified here offer a starting point for determining which challenges require strategic attention, where the Council has leverage, what should be addressed in the short or long term, and where additional analysis may be needed. This prevents premature solutioning while preparing the Council to enter strategic planning with clarity and a shared understanding.

Organizing intervention areas using the 7-S Framework provides a structured way to consider how changes in strategy, shared values, structure, systems, staffing, skills, and leadership style might collectively strengthen Council operations. Of course, listed intervention areas do not represent formal recommendations but instead reflect areas that warrant exploration during the strategic planning workshop and the subsequent Recommendations Phase.

Analysis

The following sections synthesize the gaps using the 7-S Framework, linking observed **symptoms** to organizational **gaps** that hinder execution of strategic objectives. We also suggest potential ongoing IRA projects that may be incorporated as desired to examine these issues further and/or provide solutions in the future as these projects progress. When information becomes available, consideration could also be given to the findings of the Climate and Ecosystem Steering Committee's 'communication' and 'process mapping' projects.

Strategy & Shared Values

The Council's overarching direction, priorities, and core principles that guide how decisions are made and how tradeoffs are interpreted. This dimension reflects both what the organization aims to achieve and the values that shape its approach to fulfilling its mission.

The Strategy and Shared Values dimensions are deeply interconnected, as these shape long-term goals and the principles that guide day-to-day work. While there is a strong desire for a comprehensive Strategic Plan that refines operations fosters the Council's transition toward Ecosystem Approaches to Fisheries Management (EAFM), the system currently prioritizes short-term fixes over deliberate reforms due to capacity strains and resource limitations. This reactive approach, described by participants as an approach that chases declines, highlights the need for strategic clarity and resilience. At the same time, a significant trust deficit compounds these challenges. There is a growing adversarial relationship between participants and federal scientists and managers, fueled by a belief that scientific assessments do not align with observations on the water. Amid these tensions, a couple of shared values persist: there is an "internal commitment to collaboration and reform" and widespread respect for the hard work of Council staff. Together, these dimensions reveal that strengthening strategic foresight and shared responsibility must occur in tandem to enable adaptive management. Table 12 describes gaps and their related symptoms across the strategy and shared values dimensions.

Table 12. Gaps in Strategy & Shared Values

Gap	Symptom(s)	Topic(s)	Applicable IRA Project(s)?
There is a lack of mechanisms to prioritize long-term strategy over reactive decision-making.	* The Council focuses on "chasing declines" rather than strategic opportunities. * Focus is often on short-term fixes rather than deliberate reforms.	* Adaptation & Resilience * Governance & Efficiency	* IRA 5 Holistic Strategic Plan: Aims to develop a plan to address overarching challenges and support resilient/responsive fisheries management, which includes a roadmap and performance metrics.

Gap	Symptom(s)	Topic(s)	Applicable IRA Project(s)?
Management plans are not designed to adjust to dynamic ecosystems.	* Management actions consistently lag behind environmental shifts. * Fishery participants have difficulty diversifying operations in response to changing conditions.	* Adaptation & Resilience * Governance & Efficiency	* IRA 3.1 Integrate Ecosystem Considerations: Seeks to directly connect ecosystem information to management decisions, with explicit consideration of dynamic environments. * IRA 3.2 Dynamic Reference Points: Will develop practices for integrating dynamic reference points (which change over time in response to non-stationarity) into management plans.
There is insufficient integration of ecological, social, and economic information to operationalize EAFM.	* Social and economic data is rarely incorporated into management decisions.	* Trust & Engagement * Adaptation & Resilience	* IRA 3.1 Integrate Ecosystem Considerations: Works to source data for Risk Policy factor scoring and improve information flow into the specifications setting process. * IRA 4.4 Portfolio Analysis: Will evaluate species to identify opportunities for increased yield and revenue while minimizing risks and considering biological constraints, leading to permit adjustments.
There is no strategy in place to communicate scientific uncertainty in a way that builds trust.	* Widespread "lack of trust" due to ineffective communication and negative findings delivered as surprises. * Belief that science is slow and unreflective of dynamic conditions.	* Trust & Engagement	* IRA 6.1 and 6.2 Enhancing Participatory Processes: Aims to create new communication channels and streamline processes to reduce barriers.

Gap	Symptom(s)	Topic(s)	Applicable IRA Project(s)?
There are no safeguards in place in the management process to ensure balanced and equitable influence across participant groups.	* Perception that political influences undermine fairness. * Participants perceive the system as inequitable, with legacy groups seen as having more influence than smaller or newer groups.	* Trust & Engagement * Governance & Efficiency	* IRA 6.1 and 6.2 Enhancing Participatory Processes: Aims to align services with community characteristics. * IRA 4.1 and 4.2 Cross Jurisdictional Governance: Will evaluate advisory body structure and consider representativeness of membership given shifting species distributions.
Technical complexity creates barriers to participation when not translated for non-specialists.	* Not all participants understand stock assessment modeling and rationale. * Empirical knowledge of fishers is discounted, widening the gap between industry and science.	* Trust & Engagement	* IRA 6.1 and 6.2 Enhancing Participatory Processes: Aims to develop tools for enhancing participatory processes and streamline the preparation and use of written materials like FMP documents and white papers.

Structure

The formal roles, responsibilities, and governance models that determine how authority, decision-making, and coordination occur across the Council, Committees, PDTs, staff, and advisory bodies.

The Structure dimension evaluates how the Council's organization, committees, and hierarchy facilitate or hinder decision-making. Discovery findings highlight that the Council's multi-layered committee system is a potential source of inefficiency. Advisory bodies serve as important spaces for collaboration but could benefit from regularly updating their goals and objectives to ensure they are addressing current issues. Structural misalignment and coordination challenges between the Council, GARFO, and NEFSC lead to delays in data delivery and decision-making. Table 13 describes gaps and their related symptoms across the structure dimension.

Table 13. Gaps in Structure

Gap	Symptom(s)	Topic(s)	Applicable IRA Project(s)?
There is no formal structure in place to ensure direction, coordination, and resolution across committee workflows.	* Issues circulate among groups without resolution or action. * There are bottlenecks throughout processes.	* Governance & Efficiency	* IRA 4.1 and 4.2 Cross Jurisdictional Governance: Will explore solutions for improving consistency and clarity of processes for maintaining joint or cooperative management plans. * IRA 5 Holistic Strategic Plan: Aims to identify improvements to programs, policies, and practices that would foster efficiency.
Interagency structures are not aligned to support synchronized timelines.	* There is late data arrival as timelines between Council, GARFO, and NEFSC differ. * Participants experience confusion and roles, responsibilities, and accountability across agencies are unclear.	* Governance & Efficiency * Workforce & Resources	* IRA 4.3 Regional Operating Agreements: Will update the 2014 operating agreement between NEFMC, GARFO, NEFSC, and OLE, reviewing terminology, general/specific roles, and processes.
Current advisory structures do not guarantee balanced representation across participant groups.	* Advisory panels may suffer from uneven representation. * Perception that well-organized groups are amplified while smaller operators are marginalized.	* Trust & Engagement	* IRA 4.1 and 4.2 Cross Jurisdictional Governance: Includes an evaluation of advisory body structure, use, and decision-making, and will consider the representativeness of membership given shifting species distributions.

Systems

The processes, workflows, tools and technologies, and informal practices through which work is planned, communicated, and conducted across the Council's operations.

The Systems dimension covers formal and informal procedures, including data systems, regulatory workflows, and communication channels. Findings indicate that outdated systems and rigid legal frameworks (MSA, NEPA) create significant "regulatory burdens." There is a critical lag in data systems, where stock assessment outputs often trail real-time conditions by one to two years. Additionally, the permitting system is viewed as a rigid economic barrier that stifles profitability and flexibility. Table 14 describes gaps and their related symptoms across the systems dimension.

Table 14. Gaps in Systems

Gap	Symptom(s)	Topic(s)	Applicable IRA Project(s)
Data systems are not equipped for real-time or responsive management.	* Participants are frustrated that stock assessments lag 1-2 years behind real-time conditions. * Data cannot be shared or evaluated quickly enough to inform management.	* Adaptation & Resilience * Governance & Efficiency * Trust & Engagement	* IRA 3.1 Integrate Ecosystem Considerations: Will work to automate preparation of Annual Monitoring Reports and map action development processes to identify specific on-ramps for climate and ecosystem information. * IRA 6.1 and 6.2 Enhancing Participatory Processes Will integrate modern tools and advanced technologies (AI initiative) to more efficiently and effectively analyze and share information.
Regulatory procedures generate excess burden with low utility.	* Staff spend months on options created only to satisfy procedural requirements that are never realistically considered. * Permit holders/seekers face high costs and limits	* Governance & Efficiency * Workforce & Resources	* IRA 5 Holistic Strategic Plan: Aims to identify improvements to practices that would foster efficiency. * IRA 4.4 Portfolio Analysis: Will examine permit system adjustments to optimize yield across species and minimize risks.

Gap	Symptom(s)	Topic(s)	Applicable IRA Project(s)
	on access due to the current permitting process.		
There is no standardized protocol to ensure participants routinely receive information early and clearly.	* Participants are surprised by regulatory actions based on methodologies they had not reviewed. * Negative scientific findings are often delivered as a "surprise".	* Trust & Engagement	* IRA 6.1 and 6.2 Enhancing Participatory Processes: The public communications initiative aims to create new channels for sharing information and remove barriers to communication.
There is no framework in place for managing risk that allows for adaptive management testing within regulatory constraints.	* Uncertainty leads to precautionary restrictions rather than experimentation with adaptive frameworks. * Managers report making decisions with heightened caution to avoid perceived litigation vulnerability.	* Adaptation & Resilience * Governance & Efficiency	* IRA 1 Acceptable Biological Catch Control Rules: This project modifies the ABC control rules in the context of the Council's revised Risk Policy, aiming to make management more transparent and predictable in the face of uncertainty.

Staffing, Skills, and (Leadership) Style

The capacity, capabilities, and leadership behaviors influence how effectively and efficiently the organization performs its work, including workforce composition, competencies, and dynamics.

This dimension analyzes the Council's human resources, capabilities, and decision-making culture. While there is overwhelming respect for the dedication and technical expertise of Council staff, the workforce is described as "overburdened" by statutory requirements and a diverse suite of meetings, leaving little bandwidth for innovation. The volume of required analysis and coordination strains capacity, leading to delays in action development.

Regarding skills, while scientific capacity is high, there are gaps in integrating non-biological data. Participants noted a "lack of adequate incorporation of social and economic data," often referred to as the "second rail of information." Finally, the leadership style is perceived by

some as "risk-averse," believing that uncertainty translates into precautionary restrictions that participants find unfairly burdensome. Table 15 presents gaps and their related symptoms across staffing, skills, and leadership style dimensions.

Table 15. Gaps in Staffing, Skills, and (Leadership) Style

Gap	Symptom(s)	Topic(s)	Applicable IRA Project(s)?
Operational demands exceed workforce capacity.	* Staff are stretched thin by volume of documentation for low-probability options. * Heavy workload limits bandwidth for strategic planning.	* Workforce & Resources * Governance & Efficiency	* IRA 6.1 and 6.2 Enhancing Participatory Processes: Aims to streamline routine tasks using advanced technologies/AI to save time for complex work. * IRA 5 Holistic Strategic Plan: Aims to identify improvements to programs, policies, and practices that would foster efficiency.
Federal support levels limit responsiveness and are insufficient to meet current and future demands.	* Declining workforce in the Federal Government space undermines the ability to provide timely responses to changes or emerging crises. * Workshop fatigue and bottlenecks due to multi-modal compliance requirements (i.e., MSA/NEPA, ESA, MMPA, NMSA, EOs, etc.).	* Workforce & Resources	* IRA 4.3 Regional Operating Agreements: Aims to consider the current political, funding, and resource landscape to make the operating agreement robust to future changes.
Lack of expertise to analyze and integrate socio-economic data.	* Inability to analyze and use robust social/economic data leads to distrust. * Science is viewed as unreflective of fishery operations/realities.	* Trust & Engagement * Adaptation & Resilience	* IRA 4.4 Portfolio Analysis: Involves desktop modeling and stakeholder engagement to identify opportunities for increased yield and revenue, explicitly considering the economic component.

Gap	Symptom(s)	Topic(s)	Applicable IRA Project(s)?
			* IRA 2 Atlantic Cod Management Transition: Will address fishery allocation issues and changes to the Sector management system, which are socio-economic management applications.
Engagement processes are procedural and not designed to support collaboration.	* Engagement is characterized as "box checking." * Feedback is rarely viewed as shaping outcomes, leading to engagement fatigue.	* Trust & Engagement	* IRA 6.1 and 6.2 Enhancing Participatory Processes: This initiative is focused on enhancing participatory processes and creating new channels for sharing information.

The gaps identified across the 7-S dimensions reflect an organization that is committed and capable yet constrained by what the environment demands and what the current operating model enables. Several implications emerge from this analysis, portraying an organization where friction points lead to delays, mistrust, bottlenecks, and missed opportunities for strategic focus.

Summary of Gaps

Here we synthesize the most significant gaps across strategy, shared values, structure, systems, staffing, skills, and leadership style.

1. *There is a lack of mechanisms to prioritize long-term strategy over reactive decision-making.*

The Council's focus on urgent, short-term crises crowds out the space needed for deliberate planning and adaptive management. The system's design and workload patterns leave little room for strategic sequencing or scenario planning. As a result, the Council's ability to anticipate ecological change, advance resilience, or align operations with more strategic intent is limited.

2. *Management plans are not designed to adjust to dynamic ecosystems.*

Management actions lag behind environmental shifts, and existing plan structures inhibit timely adaptation. Fishermen described limited ability to diversify operations due to rigid permitting systems, while scientific partners noted that emerging ecological changes cannot be incorporated mid-cycle. The design mismatch limits the Council's ability to pursue adaptive approaches.

3. *There is insufficient integration of balanced ecological, social, and economic information to holistically manage risk and realize desired outcomes.*

There are some gaps in socioeconomic analysis, limited use of social and economic data in management decisions, and a perception that science does not reflect real-world conditions on the water. Without a consistent approach to integration, holistic management remains difficult to operationalize. This gap contributes to skepticism and a management system overly reliance on just biological inputs.

4. *There is a need for a strategy to communicate scientific uncertainty in a way that builds trust.*

Stakeholder interpretation of scientific information can be distorted by gaps in technical knowledge, complex concepts, or misinformation. Surprise results and limited plain-language communication compound perceptions of misalignment between assessments and lived experience. This dynamic deepens the trust deficit, which reduces support for science-based decisions and undermines confidence in the management process.

5. *Operational demands exceed workforce capacity.*

The volume of required meetings, analyses, documentation, and coordination outpaces available capacity. The system depends heavily on a small number of highly specialized staff with limited redundancy for critical roles. This creates bottlenecks, delays, fatigue, and reduced bandwidth for innovation and proactive planning.

These gaps do not exist in isolation – they appear across different organizational dimensions and often reinforce one another. Limited capacity and long processes restrict the ability to plan strategically, creating a cycle where reactivity replaces foresight. Further, communication challenges deepen distrust, making it harder for information to be interpreted as legitimate. Not only that, rigid management, combined with insufficient capacity, slows the ability to adapt. The gaps are interconnected, describing a system that is scientifically grounded and highly collaborative, yet increasingly strained by growing complexity and rising expectations.

Turning Gaps into a Path Forward

While the Gap Analysis highlights misalignments that limit efficiency, responsiveness, and participant confidence, these gaps also reveal opportunities to strengthen the Council's management system. Through interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires, we saw overwhelming optimism that targeted improvements or changes could meaningfully enhance decision-making and engagement. The opportunities outlined below are potential areas where small but deliberate adjustments could lead to positive outcomes.

Several opportunities emerged from our engagement:

- **Improve transparency and understanding** by developing visual pathway maps that clarify how actions progress, where decisions occur, and how priorities align across committees and advisory bodies.
- **Strengthen coordination and focus** with clear short- and long-term prioritization processes and more deliberate workload balance.
- **Expand staff capabilities** by investing in training and tools that can expand analytical capacity and reduce burden.
- **Enhance adaptive management** capacity by establishing "triggers" that drive responses to real-time economic and environmental changes.
- **Reinforce trust and enhance stakeholder engagement** by creating consistent feedback loops that show participants how their input informs decisions and by offering plain language updates between meetings.

Success Metrics

As the Council considers how to address these opportunities during the Strategic Planning Phase, it may be helpful to begin considering possible success metrics. These do not represent proposed targets, but rather examples of the types of indicators that could help the Council assess progress, monitor improvement, and evaluate the effectiveness of future recommendations. A sampling of success metrics the Council may consider during strategic planning is provided in Table 16.

Table 16. Example Success Metrics

Success Metric	How To Measure	What It Tells Us
Percent of staff time spent on strategic initiatives	Time coding or regular survey to determine % hours spent on strategic work	Whether long-term planning is gaining dedicated time
Number of issues that move cleanly through committees/PDTs without rework	Track issue pathways and time to resolution	How clearly roles and pathways are defined and whether structural bottlenecks are improving
Number of hours staff spend on low-probability alternatives or procedural tasks	Time coding or regular survey via time coding or regular survey to estimate hours	Whether regulatory processes are becoming more "right-sized"
Frequency of early briefings, plain-language summaries, or "no surprise" scientific updates	Number of communication products; click rates; pulse check stakeholders on communications	Whether communication is seen, improving stakeholder trust, and reducing surprises
Percent of staff workload by function	Time coding or regular survey to understand quarterly workloads	Whether operational demands still exceed capacity and where relief is needed
Number of actions using triggers, interim data, or mid-cycle adjustments	Count of adaptive tools/processes in action development	Whether adaptive management readiness is increasing in response to changes

It will be essential for the Council to agree on success metrics during the Strategic Planning and Recommendations phases, as shared measures of success enable consistent tracking of progress and strengthen accountability. The examples above are not prescriptive but are intended to 1) orient the Council toward the types of outcomes they may want to prioritize and 2) provide a sense of the time and effort it will take to both drive and demonstrate progress. As the Strategic Plan takes shape, the Council will need to define a formal performance framework that connects long-term goals to clear success metrics and aligns with the Council's capacity.

Positioning the Council for Strategic Planning and Recommendations

It is critical to understand that gaps are challenges, of course, but also points of opportunity; they provide the foundation needed to help participants evaluate tradeoffs and make informed decisions about where to intervene. The Strategic Planning Phase will build on this analysis by:

- Clarifying the Council's long-term direction and/or desired future state.
- Prioritizing the most significant or impactful intervention areas.
- Identifying what changes could produce the most meaningful, sustainable improvements.
- Establishing criteria for evaluating options and sequencing action steps.
- Determining quick wins builds momentum while planning for longer-term changes.

The Recommendations Phase will then translate these strategic priorities into actionable steps, such as governance improvements, workflow enhancements, participant engagement approaches, or workforce adjustments. Ultimately, the Council will receive a roadmap that connects what we learned during the Discovery Phase to clear options for change and an actionable path forward that supports the Strategic Plan.

Strategic Planning Workshop Overview

The Council will hold a dedicated Strategic Planning Workshop (January 2026) to leverage the Gap Analysis. During this workshop, Council members will clarify the long-term vision and draft the Mission Statement and Strategic Plan.

This 1.5-day intensive closed session with Council members will be led by an experienced facilitator with support from Parnin Team staff. The workshop is designed to move the Council from assessing their current reality to defining a visionary future. The goal is to build consensus on realistic, actionable priorities that address near-term needs (1-2 years) and long-term goals (5+ years), leaving participants with a concrete draft plan and a shared sense of optimism for change.

Key Steps for Development

1. Preparation (Pre-Workshop)

- **Alignment:** The internal team, facilitator and key NEFMC Staff will dedicate preparation time to aligning methods, specific outcomes, and meeting logistics.
- **Participant Briefing:** A "Current State" report, encompassing Discovery and Gap Analysis findings (challenges and successes) and a list of potential strategic topics are distributed to Council members 7-10 days prior to the session.

2. Workshop Execution (The 1.5-Day Process)

- **Assess & Vision:** Review the "Current State" and collaborate to define the "Desired Future State" regarding Council results and operations (people, processes, technology).
- **Gap Analysis & Prioritization:** Through break-out groups, members identify the major gaps between the current and future states. They drill down into specific issues to prioritize work that is realistic and accomplishable.
- **Drafting:** The facilitator guides the group in developing a draft Mission and Vision statement that aligns with these priorities.

3. Outputs & Outcomes

By the end of the session, the Council will produce a Draft Holistic Strategic Plan that includes:

- Draft Mission and Vision Statements.
- **3-4 Core Goals** to close identified gaps.
- Success Measures and Priority Initiatives for each goal.

Key Questions for the Council to Consider

Here are four key questions designed to move thinking **from operational needs to strategic vision**.

1. **The "Core Purpose" Question (Mission):**
   Is the mission of conserving and managing fishery resources still valid? What if any changes to our current mission statement are necessary to clarify the value or promise to deliver?

2. **The "Future State" Question (Vision):**
   If we look ahead 10 years from now and say we have successfully transitioned from 'reactive' to 'resilient,' what will be the most significant changes or improvements to have occurred in the New England marine ecosystem?

3. **The "Agility" Question (Structure & Systems):**
   Where are the best opportunities to increase flexibility and speed in our plans? What decisions or actions are the best candidates for automation?

4. **The "Trade-off" Question (Strategy & Capacity):**
   What specific current activities, processes, or low-priority tasks are we willing to stop doing or streamline to create bandwidth for a new strategic vision and plan?

Appendix B: Benchmarking Analysis

The Parnin Group carried out a series of benchmarking inquiries to inform the development of the New England Fishery Management Council's (NEFMC) strategic plan and identify potential improvements in the fishery management process. With iterative feedback from NEFMC staff members and the guiding Oversight Team (OST) supporting our work, we concentrated our efforts on four Fishery Management Councils – the NEFMC, Mid-Atlantic Council (MAFMC), Pacific Council (PFMC), and South Atlantic Council (SAFMC). In total, these Councils represent over 500,000 square miles of managed territory and represent twenty-eight separate fishery management plans (FMPs)

The Parnin Group focused this analysis on four key areas:

1. Structure and Staffing of Benchmarked Councils
2. Organizational Structure and Governance
3. Council and Sub-Body Operational Audit for NEFMC
4. Process Efficiency and Action Item Timelines

Structure and Staffing of Benchmarked Councils

Key takeaways: While Fishery Management Councils manage vastly different jurisdictions, both in spatial area as well as fishery species, they operate with similar staffing resource levels.

- **Resource Parity:** Despite varying levels of management responsibility, all four Councils (NEFMC, MAFMC, SAFMC, PFMC) operate with similar staff sizes (14–19 employees).
- **NEFMC Staffing:** NEFMC has the largest staff size (nineteen) among the benchmarked group. However, the organization is considered "lean" given the span of topics and coverage by staff, presenting potential operational risks in the event of staff turnover or elongated leave.
- **FMP Support Ratios:** NEFMC falls around the middle of the group regarding dedicated Fishery Management Plan (FMP) support, with a ratio of one staff member for every 1.2 FMPs.
- **Structural Differences:** While the Councils have many similar staff roles, SAFMC is distinct for having a larger communications team and a dedicated finance role, while lacking dedicated IT or data science staff.

Although Fishery Management Councils (FMCs) manage fisheries spanning vastly different geographies with varying management considerations, they generally operate with similar numbers of staff and positions to meet their mandates. The four FMCs benchmarked have an average staff size of sixteen. NEFMC has the largest staffing level of nineteen, including one recent new hire, and MAFMC has the smallest number of staff at fourteen.

Many of the FMCs have similar staffing distributions and positions. Each FMC has between 45% and 65% of their staff allocated to positions that directly manage and support their FMPs. The Parnin Group's focus groups and interviews revealed that, while FMC staff tend to have broad responsibilities and diverse roles, their ability to provide dedicated support to each FMP is a key indicator of the organization's capacity and resilience to adapt efficiently to unforeseen disruptions. The number of support staff per FMP ranges from 1:1, where SAFMC has just one staff member for each of the eight FMPs they manage, to 1.4:1 where PFMC has seven staff members to support five FMPs. NEFMC is between these two, with twelve staff supporting ten separate FMPs, a ratio of 1.1:1.

Having a coverage ratio of 1:1 is ideal, as it ensures single departures or absences do not cause outsized effects on the management responsibilities of the Council. As most of the roles in the

Council staff are quite technical and high-skilled, finding replacements for departing employees can be more challenging, and thus the ratio of coverage is important to consider when managing risks and developing organizational resiliency. This finding highlights potential operational risks for an organization that is as lean as NEFMC, particularly in cases of extended leave or sudden staff departure coupled with the lack of knowledgeable candidates to immediately backfill critical roles.

Each of the four FMCs has an Executive Director at the head of the organization, but there are differences in other leadership roles below them. PFMC has a Deputy Director while MAFMC has an Operations Officer. Further, NEFMC has an Administrative Officer while SAFMC has two Deputy Directors of Science and Management, respectively (see Table 17).

The remaining staff fulfill administrative and support roles with some notable differences in organization. SAFMC is the only FMC of the four with a dedicated finance position, listed as a Finance Secretary, captured in Table 17 under the administrative position category. SAFMC has a substantially larger number of staff responsible for communications with a Public Information Officer, a Best Fishing Practices Outreach Specialist, and a Digital Media & Communications Specialist. Simultaneously, SAFMC is the only FMC of the four that does not have at least one IT or data science role. NEFMC may consider further evaluating and bolstering their existing communications and outreach capacity and staff skill sets relative to other Councils.

Table 17. Staffing Across FMCs

Position	NEFMC	PFMC	SAFMC	MAFMC
Executive Director	1	1	1	1
Deputy Director / Operations Officer	0	1	2	1
Fishery Management Specialist / Analyst	12	7	8	9
IT / Data Specialist	1	2	0	1
Communications	1	0	3	1
Administrative	3	4	3	1

Organizational Structure and Governance

Key takeaways: NEFMC maintains high organizational complexity and relies on smaller, agile working groups relative to other FMCs.

- **High Complexity:** NEFMC has the highest degree of organizational complexity, maintaining forty-four sub-bodies, notably more than the other councils (28–34 sub-bodies).
- **Mission Focus:** NEFMC sub-bodies generally focus on FMPs directly, with 70% explicitly dedicated to supporting FMP subject areas.
- **Small Team Size:** Despite having the most sub-bodies, NEFMC has the smallest average membership count per group (seven members) compared to SAFMC (fifteen members).
- **Risks and Benefits:** While smaller groups allow NEFMC to be nimbler, they create risks regarding succession planning and volunteer engagement. Inactive panels or low participation could impede regular operations.

The organization of an FMC involves significant coordination between various organizations and government bodies, further complicated by a high degree of participation from the fishing industry

and the public. The four FMCs benchmarked showcase the high degree to which councils solicit multiple perspectives and contributions through their various sub-bodies. In addition to participating in and working with the numerous international bodies and government entities at the federal, state, and local levels, FMCs also often convene meetings with community members represented by recreational fishers, commercial fishers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), conservation advocates, and science and research experts, among others. Accordingly, The Parnin Group analyzed how FMCs oversee their various advisory committees and working groups.

Generally, the FMCs have similar organizational designs for their sub-bodies, with some notable differences in naming conventions (Tables 17 and 18). In particular, the PFMC uses Management Teams, Advisory Sub-Panels, and Subcommittees in lieu of more common terms like Committees, Monitoring Committees, and Advisory Panels. Similarities across FMCs are, in large part, related to mandates and legal requirements that dictate components and forums for stakeholder engagement under the MSA fishery management process, regardless of geographical location. [1]

However, the four FMCs display some discrete differences. NEFMC showcases a high degree of organizational complexity, with the largest number of sub-bodies compared to other FMCs. Of the FMCs, NEFMC has the highest number of mission-focused sub-bodies, directly involved in managing their FMPs, with nearly 70% of them explicitly dedicated to supporting FMP subject areas, demonstrating strong mission focus. Tables 17 and 18 present summary information regarding FMC sub-bodies, including how sub-bodies are organized across the Councils. Table 18 focuses on FMP-specific sub-bodies.

Table 18. Organization of Sub-Bodies and FMP Support Across FMCs

Parameter	NEFMC	PFMC	SAFMC	MAFMC
FMPs	10	5	8	7
Number of Sub-Bodies	44	28	32	34
Number of Sub-Bodies Supporting FMPs	31	17	17	20
Percentage of Sub-Bodies Supporting FMPs	70%	60%	53%	58%
Total Members*	299	281	479	431
Average size of Sub-bodies	7 Members	10 Members	15 Members	12 Members

*Note: these membership totals have segment overlaps as many members listed participate in multiple sub-bodies. These numbers count all members, not unique members.

NEFMC has comparably smaller and leaner advisory bodies which may enable operational agility, but their small size creates potential risks regarding workload distribution and long-term succession planning for advisory body members. Among benchmarked Councils, NEFMC has the smallest average number of members in their advisory bodies at seven. Additionally, several advisory bodies within NEFMC report no active members and/or are inactive. Sunsetting inactive groups is appropriate at times, but NEFMC should have an offboarding process, particularly to try and retain individuals who have participated in the council process and potentially bring them into broader involvement after their particular issue area is addressed.

[1] Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act; Regional Fishery Management Councils; Operations, 50 CFR § 600 (adopted September 27, 2010) https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2010-24222

Given NEFMC's comparably large number of FMPs, more robust advisory body membership could allow for additional allocation of support activities (Table 19). Further, building out these groups would address risks associated with membership turnover and disengagement. Larger bodies are better able to address succession and departure, which is natural in primarily volunteer roles; however, expanding the existing groups may result in less efficient collaboration, diluted responsibility, or a lack of clear task ownership unless explicitly addressed. If additional support is garnered by expanding some of these groups, it is also necessary that leadership, governance, and guidance also grow in scope and size to ensure these larger bodies maintain direction and efficiency.

NEFMC's smaller advisory bodies may be an asset, as smaller groups are generally more agile and flexible, which are valuable traits in the dynamic field of fishery management. The value of the nimbleness of relatively smaller advisory groups is demonstrated by the efficiency of NEFMC taking actions, particularly framework actions, which we elaborate upon in the following section. NEFMC may owe a portion of its efficiency to the manageable size of its advisory bodies such that adjustments to the current levels should be assessed with care. Potential efficiencies from expanding the groups (e.g., in organizational continuity, workforce, and size/scope) may not ultimately be worth the potential losses in efficiency derived from leanness, particularly in FMP supporting sub-bodies.

Table 19. Committees and Advisory Groups Across FMCs

FMC	FMP	Comm.	Monitoring Comm.	Mgmt. Team	Advisory Panel	Advisory Subpanel	Work Group	Tech. Team	Sub-Comm.	Plan Dev. Team
NEFMC	Northeast Multispecies (Groundfish)	1			2					1
	Sea Scallop	1			1					1
	Monkfish	1			1					1
	Atlantic Herring	1			1					1
	Essential Fish Habitat	1			1					1
	Skates	1			1					1
	Small-Mesh Multispecies	1			1					1
	Red Crab	0			1					1
	Spiny Dogfish	1			1					1
	Atlantic Salmon	0			0					1
PFMC	Groundfish			1		1	1		1	
	Salmon			0		1	2	1	1	
	Coastal Pelagic Species			1		1			1	
	Highly Migratory Species			1		1			1	
	Ecosystem-Based Management			0		1	1		1	

FMC	FMP	Comm.	Monitoring Comm.	Mgmt. Team	Advisory Panel	Advisory Subpanel	Work Group	Tech. Team	Sub-Comm.	Plan Dev. Team
MAFMC	Summer Flounder, Scup, Black Sea Bass	1	1		1					
	Mackerel, Squid, Butterfish	1	1		1					
	Atlantic Surfclam and Ocean Quahog	1	0		1					
	Bluefish	1	1		1					
	Golden and Blueline Tilefish	1	1		1					
	Spiny Dogfish	1	1		1					
	Monkfish	1	0		0					
SAFMC	Coastal Migratory Pelagics	1			1					
	Coral and Live Bottom Habitat	1			1					
	Dolphin and Wahoo	1			1					
	Golden Crab	0			1					
	Sargassum	0			0					
	Shrimp	1			1					
	Snapper Grouper	1			3					
	Spiny Lobster	1			1					
TOTALS		**21**	**5**	**3**	**24**	**5**	**4**	**1**	**5**	**10**

Note: Fields with a zero count represent potential data limitations or groups that did not report active members. This table only reports advisory bodies that are directly affiliated with specific FMPs.

This benchmarking analysis can serve the council as a jumping off point to better understanding how they allocate their time and effort. Understanding the workload that goes into the Council process is an intensive effort, but it also illuminates what needs to be prioritized. Future prioritization exercises could also examine the quantity of sub body meetings, especially in light of the size of the participant pool. One observation when reviewing the members of the various Council sub-bodies is that many individuals have roles in or responsibilities to multiple sub-bodies, which can become difficult to juggle especially in the work sprints leading up to Council meetings and efforts to review and finalize deliverables and recommendations so Council can vote or decide on topics.

Accordingly, some sub-bodies could consider adopting joint meetings. Doing so would also enhance the strategic plan goal of achieving more efficient dialogue and communication between groups. Taken a step further, another potential efficiency could be achieved by conducting concurrent Council meetings with Plan Development teams, members of the Statistic and Scientific Committee (SSC) or committees and Advisory Panels as appropriate. This would be another option council could experiment with to enhance efficiency.

Council and Sub-Body Operational Audit for NEFMC

Key takeaways: NEFMC provides comprehensive coverage of management and governance topics across its numerous components and sub-bodies leaving little room for additional efficiencies without tradeoffs.

- **External Collaboration:** Nearly 40% of presentations to NEFSC and its sub-bodies are given or facilitated by non-Council and non-staff members, indicating that a wide range of groups collaborate in support of Council operations.
- **Opportunities for Efficiency:** Some NEFMC meeting elements (e.g., Council Meeting Agenda setting) are consistent and predictable, and these elements may benefit from bundling topics, prioritization exercises, and consent agendas to reclaim time for emergent issues and discussions.
- **Resource Intensity:** The workload supporting NEFMC efforts is substantial, requiring the creation of dozens of files, reports, pre-briefs, presentations, and other materials. Reading and preparing for NEFSC activities are extensive exercises for Council members.

Our analysis for this section was a deeper subject dive, limited to NEFMC alone, that aims to explore how NEFMC members and staff conduct their work collaboratively by asking six key questions:

- How frequently are they meeting,
- Who is involved and who is presenting information,
- How are meetings conducted,
- What topics are covered and how frequently,
- How much time is allotted for meetings, and
- How many resources are prepared for meetings.

To perform this analysis, we reviewed agendas and materials for seventy meetings of NEFMC and its sub-bodies taking place between January 1, 2024, and January 31, 2026. We acknowledge several assumptions and constraints in conducting this analysis. First, the term 'meetings' includes meetings by the Council as well as all sub-bodies. We sorted these bodies into eight primary groups based on data availability: full Council Meetings, Executive Committee Meetings, Risk Policy Meetings, Ecosystem Steering Meetings, Enforcement Monitoring Meetings, On-Demand Fishing Gear Meetings, Trans-Boundary Meetings, and Scientific and Statistical Committee Meetings. Accordingly, the various types of subgroups presented in the section above (i.e., advisory panels, subcommittees, working groups, sub-panels, joint committees, plan development teams, etc.) were combined and analyzed under the broader FMP, species, or topic that they support.

Table 20 and Table 21 summarize the key findings and data stemming from the review of Council meetings and sub-body meetings. Table 20 shows the averages across six categories of data analyzed and displays them across three grouping: Council meetings, sub-body meetings, and all meetings (Council and Sub-body) combined. This analysis shows the differences between who is presenting and leading in meetings, the number of resources prepared and reviewed for meetings, and the number of discrete topics being addressed.

*Table 20. NEFMC Meeting Analysis Averages**

Category	Council Meetings	Sub-Body Meetings	All Meetings
Meeting Duration (Hours)	20	6.5	8
Presentations by NEFMC Staff	2	2.5	2.5
Presentations by NEFMC Members	5.5	0.7	1.3
Presentations by Others	6.6	1.8	2.4
Resources Prepared/Distributed*	13.9	5.1	6.2
Discrete Topics Discussed	15.5	4.5	5.9

**Note: This was calculated by reviewing Council agendas and attachments. Each discrete attachment, be they reports, summaries, PowerPoint slides, etc., was counted as a resource prepared and distributed for the meeting. Not all resources were prepared by NEFMC staff, and some resources were redistributed multiple times.*

Notably, the leading contributor for Council meetings is the group of non-Council/non-staff members, often members of the NFSC or NOAA. This highlights the input for Council meetings and how these other groups are crucial for council processes. It also suggests that the Council itself is often the audience for updates from these other groups, highlighting that it is very collaborative in nature, but that there are dependencies inherit in its processes. Another element highlighted through this analysis is the number of resources prepared and the breadth of topics discussed. This reinforces the sense of stress and strain expressed in interviews for this report.

Our analysis of Council meetings, operations, and processes revealed that these intensive, multi-day governance sessions occur on a predictable quarterly schedule. While NEFMC meetings are well spaced with four main meetings throughout a twelve-month period, the operational risk for the Council and its activities lies in the sequence of related events such as sub-body meetings that feed information into the Council decision-making process. Typically, there is an increase in activity for these groups in the weeks leading up to and following Council meetings, which creates implicit workload spikes for NEFMC members and those supporting the Council's work. Meeting cadence and associated workloads have implications for strategic planning efforts, as the workflows and compressed period of preparation can cause cascading issues for staff, including burnout, attentional fatigue, workload and scope creep, and increased multitasking.

One indicator for the workload attributable to Council meetings is the number of resources that are prepared for them. These resources range from simple one-page summaries to deeply complex analysis and presentations, making this quantification of materials being prepared and distributed unable to fully capture intricacies related to workload; however, it does illustrate a trend, that the Council is at an inflection point where workloads potentially outweigh current resources. This is also underscored in our analysis of staff FMP coverage, where we determined that the ratio of staff to FMP topics is 1.2:1, necessitating more coordination and management as individuals are responsible for multiple FMPs. As a result, staff and participants in the Council process are increasingly being asked to manage multiple parallel efforts, dividing their attention and causing delays.

To address this issue, Council members and staff can engage in a more deliberate sequencing effort, identifying sub-components of work deliverables, relative timelines for each deliverable, and iterative deadlines to better segment work that feeds into Council meetings. Doing so can help to disaggregate intensive work sprints and better avoid these risks. However, we acknowledge that many of the Council processes and data inputs have their own dependencies and constraints, like scientific data collection, so some workload issues may be harder to address than others and some may be outside of NEFMC's ability to influence or control at all.

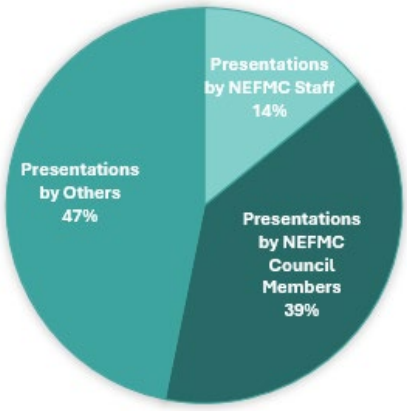


Figure 6. Council Meeting Presenters

During Council meetings, presentations and discussions are driven primarily by council members and others (e.g., GARFO, NEFSC, other NMFS personnel, New England state representatives), with the latter being the majority (Figure 6). This distribution of presenters reflects the nature of the Council's collaborative process but also highlights its dependency on multiple sources of information from a wide range of external partners.

While Figure 5 suggests a limited role for Council staff, leading only 14% of presentations, our focus groups and interviews confirm they are central to coordination, information synthesis, and facilitation.

This 'invisible workload' is a critical, behind-the-scenes driver of operational success. However, because Council staffs' efforts are not tracked, their full impact remains difficult to quantify beyond the simple measures presented here, and adding new tracking requirements risks further straining an already overburdened staff.

NEFMC meetings employ hybrid formats whereby meetings are broadcast virtually while simultaneously being conducted in-person. While hybrid meetings have become standard in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this approach can present drawbacks despite promoting and enabling broader awareness and participation. Hybrid formats often increase meeting fatigue, which is notable for Council meetings that are multi-day affairs and require more preparation. [2] They also often come with more administrative and logistic coordination and workload, managing Audio and Visual components for multiple audiences and trouble shooting tech issues that may arise. With that said, hybrid meetings offer many benefits, like cost savings, reduced barriers to participation, and more flexibility for participants. It is likely that, at this point there is not much opportunity nor rationale to change formats. However, there may exist opportunities to review meeting topics and better decide which *must* be handled concurrently in meetings and which can be handled asynchronously in other meetings or pre-briefings.

The Council is often lauded for the incredible breadth and depth of subject matters it covers. It should be lauded for providing consistent and broad oversight while encouraging regular discussion of all topics the Council is required to oversee (and exploring potential issues). This determination is based on topic analysis of Council agendas and does not necessarily reflect the amount of time spent on each topic. In our interviews, we found that some respondents noted certain topics may be commanding too much attention or time. Table 21 presents a breakdown of topics that were frequently discussed during Council meetings that generally shows where the Council places its priority and items that are of major interest in recent years. Beside it is a table that shows the additional topics the Council has discussed two or fewer times.

[2] Tolliver, M., & Sass, J. (2024, June 17). Hybrid work has changed meetings forever. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2024/06/hybrid-work-has-changed-meetings-forever

Table 21. Frequency of Council Meeting Topics, from 1/1/24 to 1/31/26

Topic	Occurrences
Groundfish	11
Council Operations	9
Scallop	9
On-Demand Fishing Gear	7
Risk Policy	6
Herring	6
Monkfish	5
Fishery Monitoring	5
Scientific and Statistical Committee	5
Ecosystem	4
Strategic Planning	4
Habitat	4
IRA Projects	3
Transboundary Management	3
Climate	3
Stock Assessments	3
Skate	3
Whiting	3
Spiny Dogfish	3
Northeast Trawl	3

Topics Discussed 2 or Fewer Times
Enforcement
Georges Banks
Congressional Activity
Recreational Fishing
Industry Engagement
Offshore Energy
Social Sciences
Management Flexibility
EO 14276 Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness
Yellowtail Flounder
Highly Migratory Species
Black Sea Bass
Bycatch Reporting
Carbon Capture
Environmental Justice

Regarding Council meeting topics, there is a remarkable amount of consistency. Most meetings have about 12-16 topics with a similar amount of materials prepared for or associated with the meeting. However, the cognitive load, or the amount of mental effort or memory resources needed at a given time, for these meetings is very high given the number of topics and resources. Additionally, there is little flexibility in meetings to absorb additional items without tradeoffs. An opportunity exists for the Council to rethink and retool how they approach their meetings, specifically through prioritization exercises and/or bundling topics. Currently, the Council's approach seems to be 'full agenda by default,' and bundling topics and associated resources could meaningfully reduce the amount of time and energy spent on preparations. Even small efficiency gains in these areas can have a larger impact because they compound across the four regular meetings per year.

The Council might consider adopting a consent agenda to better manage its topics and provide more efficiency to its meetings. Consent agendas are project management tools for governance settings that group routine, non-controversial, and self-explanatory items, such as status updates, internal Council operations, and budget updates, into a single agenda item to be voted on *en masse*. Consent agendas typically require that members read materials ahead of time and notify a chair or other leader preceding the meeting if they wish to discuss the item. Otherwise, the Council would approve all items in the consent agenda together assuming that members read the materials and are aware

of any issues related to information provided therein. Consent agendas can provide substantial time saving and efficiency for groups like the FMCs. They require consistent and dependable engagement from participants and can create risks if members default to accepting them 'on auto-pilot' without reviewing the necessary materials and ensuring that they understand and agree. Table 22 presents the results of an expanded analysis reviewing all seventy meetings across the Council and its sub-bodies and listing the top twenty topics discussed.

*Table 22. All Meeting Topics**

Topic	Occurrences
Risk Policy	21
Council Operations	18
Scallop	17
On-Demand Fishing Gear	15
Ecosystem	15
IRA Projects	12
Groundfish	11
Herring	11
Transboundary Management	11
Strategic Planning	10
Budget	10
Framework adjustments	9
Monkfish	8
ABC Controls	8
Climate	7
Stock Assessments	7
Social Sciences	7
Management Actions	6
Public Outreach	6
Fishery Monitoring	5

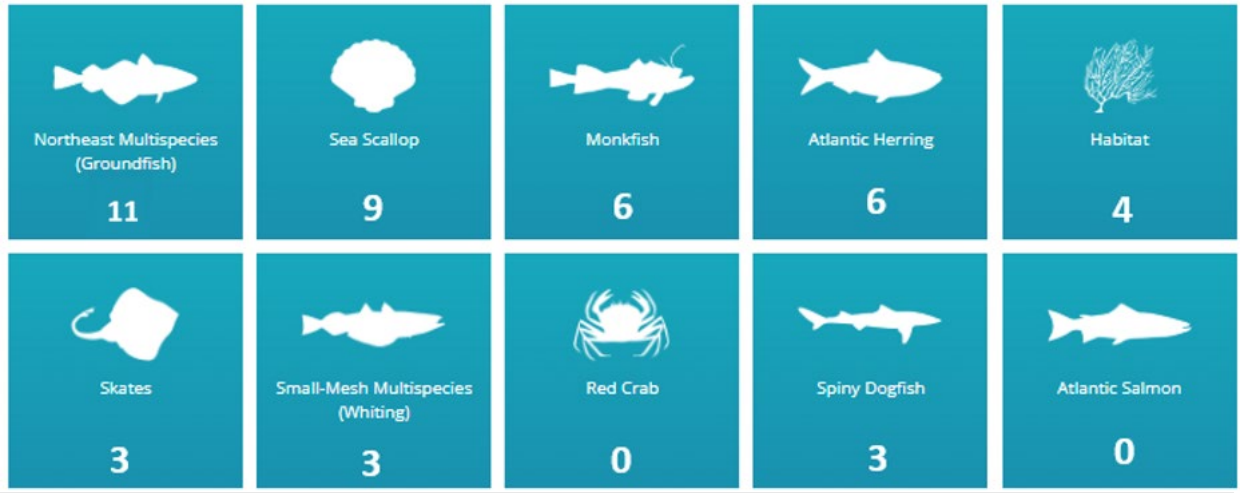
Risk Policy emerges as the number one topic discussed, but this may be due to the time period of analysis including almost monthly meetings for the Risk Policy Working group over nine months in a row to design, test, and implement the Risk Policy. Ecosystem related topics and IRA projects were also more frequent across the full data set, likely because these efforts are cross cutting and the IRA Projects in particular are time bound and require significant attention to manage and execute.

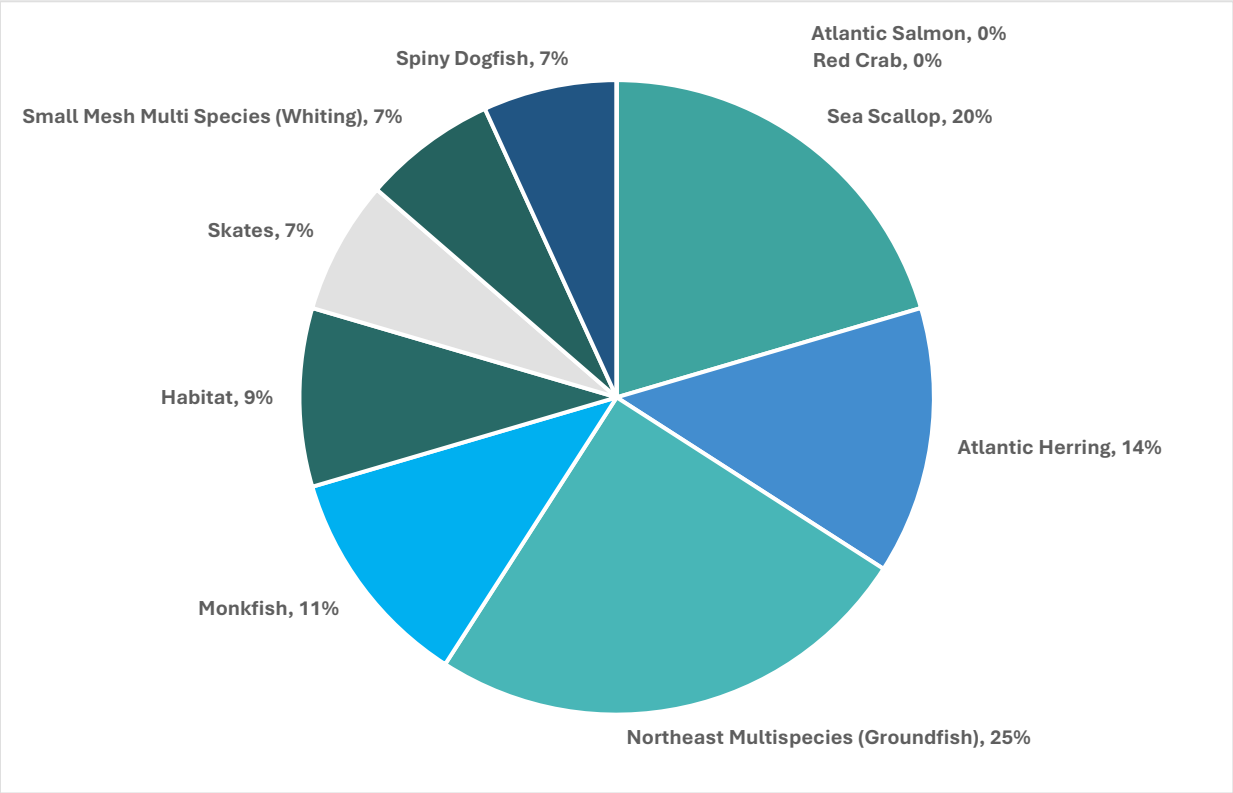
Notably, public outreach is primarily addressed in executive committee agendas. Considering the emphasis the Council members place on public engagement over the course of developing goals for the strategic plan, it may be worthwhile to elevate the topic and address it more consistently in Council meetings as well. It is possible that public engagement integrates within some existing Council topics and may not need to be addressed independently.

Figure 7 shows how often the Councils nine FMPs and the management of Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) were discussed, both in total counts and then in a pie chart showing their relative percentage. The most discussed FMP species is Groundfish, followed by Sea Scallop. Though there were no specific agenda items identified for Red Crab and Atlantic Salmon, this is understandable given the state of each.

*Note: This meeting analysis was conducted based on publicly available historic agendas on NEFMC's website. These are preliminary estimates, subject to revision and may not reflect final Council agendas or real-time changes that may not have been updated retroactively. This analysis is intended to provide a baseline for informing future Council priorities and efforts.

Figure 7. Council Meeting FMP Discussions and Proportions





The Council set a multi-year specification for 2024-2027 for Red Crab. The fishery has a comparatively small portion of activity and typically consists of four active vessels fishing for a relatively small market, so it is reasonable that the Council would not have many discussions about the FMP. Further, Atlantic Salmon is currently designated as an endangered species and is not commercially viable nor legal to fish. The Council may have tangential dealings related to enforcement and monitoring, but it is not a topic the Council is likely to cover in its regular meetings.

Currently, three FMPs, Sea Scallop, Atlantic Herring, and Groundfish, command the majority of Council's discussion time, with groundfish being the leading topic covered in every Council meeting agenda reviewed. Expanding beyond the Council's meetings to consider the broader group inclusive of all sub-bodies, the following FMP managed species and marine resources were discussed at least

once in the last two years: Sea Scallop, Atlantic Herring, groundfish/Multispecies, Monkfish, Skates, Small-Mesh/Whiting, Spiny Dogfish, Trawl Harvested Species, Yellowtail Flounder, Highly Migratory Species, Black sea Bass, Bycatch, Atlantic Large Whale Take, Atlantic Tuna, Cod, Haddock, Walleye Pollock, Atlantic Wolffish, Halibut, Redfish, Sardine, and Witch Flounder. Most of these topics were only discussed one or two times each, and many were discussed in more technical settings such as meetings of specific sub panels or sub-bodies supporting the SSC.

Process Efficiency and Action Item Timelines

Key takeaways: There is a sharp dichotomy in NEFMC's efficiency: it is the Council that completes Framework actions the fastest, but completes Amendment actions the slowest.

- **Framework Speed:** NEFMC is the leader in efficiency for Framework actions, completing them in an average of sixteen months, faster than the SAFMC (twenty one months) and MAFMC (twenty four and a half months).
- **Amendment Delays:** Conversely, NEFMC takes the longest to complete Amendment actions (fifty eight months on average), which is nearly double the time taken by PFMC.
- **The "Initial Stage" Bottleneck:** The primary cause for amendment delays is the "Initial Stage/Alternatives Development," where NEFMC takes an average of thirty six months, compared to an average of twenty three and a half months across other Councils.
- **Rulemaking Bottleneck:** NEFMC also faces delays during the rulemaking stage, notably a ten-month average gap between taking final action and publication of the proposed rule.

On average, NEFMC's action item timelines are comparable to the MAFMC, SAFMC, and PFMC across most stages of the action development process (Table 23). The initial stage of action item development is generally faster at NEFMC than at any other evaluated Council, mainly due to NEFMC's frequent use of Framework adjustments, which tend to be smaller in scope and move more quickly. On the other hand, the average overall time that NEFMC items take in the rulemaking stages (from final Council action to the NMFS publication of a final rule) is substantially higher than at other Councils, suggesting that NEFMC action items may undergo a lengthier revision and negotiation process following transmittal to NMFS. Though action items are handed over to NMFS following submission by the Council, there is an opportunity collaborate more closely with NMFS during the development stage, creating documents that are already primed and well prepared to expedite NMFS' processing. NEFMC actions, on average, take less time than at SAFMC and PFMC, and are comparable to the average duration of a MAFMC action. Both MAFMC and NEFMC use framework actions more frequently, which helps bring down their average time to completion.

NEFMC uses framework actions very effectively, having a sixteen-month action timeframe on average; this is five months faster than the SAFMC median and over eight months faster than the MAFMC median. However, the NEFMC amendment process is the opposite, taking the longest on average of the four evaluated Councils.

Table 23. NEFMC Action Item Timeline Overview

Action Stage	Average Time Taken	Range of Time Taken	Notes
Initial stage/ Alternatives development	9 months	4-44 months	Lower than MAFMC on average. Notably lower than SAFMC and PFMC. NEFMC's use of quick framework actions explains the faster initial stage.
Public hearings and review	5 months	2-7 months	Comparable to MAFMC, SAFMC, PFMC. This stage generally takes the same amount of time across FMCs.
Council Final action until NOAA proposed	10 months	1-19 months	Comparable to MAFMC, SAFMC. Notably slower than PFMC, which tends to get to a proposed rule within 4-8 months of final action.
Gap between final action and submission to NOAA	2 months	1-13 months	Comparable to MAFMC, but faster than SAFMC. Limited data for PFMC.
Time from NOAA proposed to Final	3.5 months	2-15 months	Comparable to MAFMC, SAFMC, PFMC.
Total NOAA Rulemaking	15 months	3-34 months	Higher than MAFMC, SAFMC, PFMC. Although both rulemaking stages are largely comparable to the other Councils, NEFMC is held back by outliers in both NMFS decision periods.
Entire timeline	24.5 months	9-85 months	Comparable to MAFMC, it is significantly lower than SAFMC, slightly slower than PFMC. Again, NEFMC benefits significantly from a preference for rapid framework actions.

Table 24 provides a quick visual of average times, in months, for each stage in the action process where green indicates the fastest analyzed Council and red indicates the slowest analyzed Council on average in each of the periods measured. This table pertains to all actions.

Table 24. Action Item Timelines Across FMCs (# of Months taken per stage)

Council	Initial	Comment	Proposed	Final	Total Rulemaking	Total Time	Time to deliver preliminary submission to NMFS
NEFMC	**9**	**5**	**10**	**3.5**	**15**	**24.5**	**2**
MAFMC	12	5.5	10	3	12	25	3
SAFMC	18.5	5	10	3.5	12.5	45	4.5
PFMC	15.5	3.5	6.5	3	9.5	26.5	N/A
Average	*13.75*	*4.75*	*9*	*3.25*	*12.25*	*30.25*	*3*

Table 25 provides the breakdown for average times for amendment actions. Note that all PFMC actions were classified as amendment actions. NEFMC amendments tend to be slower on average than other Councils, notably taking the longest time in the initial stage, the proposed rule stage, and overall. A large portion of the proposed rule stage can be explained by the nine-month average gap between Council final action and transmittal to NMFS, which appears to be the main bottleneck in the rulemaking process.

Table 25. Amendment Action Timelines Across FMCs

Council	Initial	Comment	Proposed	Final	Total Rulemaking	Total Time	Time to deliver preliminary submission to NMFS
NEFMC	**36**	**6**	**13**	**3**	**16**	**58**	**9**
MAFMC	24	6	12	3	17	42	4.5
SAFMC	19	5	12	3	14	55	5
PFMC	15.5	3.5	6.5	3	9.5	26.5	N/A
Average	*23.5*	*5.25*	*11*	*3*	*14.25*	*45.5*	*6.25*

Table 26 provides the breakdown for average times for framework actions. Note that PFMC actions were not included, as there were no framework actions identified. NEFMC's framework actions are much faster than MAFMC and SAFMC on average, holding the fastest average times for the initial, proposed rule, total rulemaking, and overall.

Table 26. Framework Action Timelines Across FMCs

Council	Initial	Comment	Proposed	Final	Total Rulemaking	Total Time	Time to deliver preliminary submission to NMFS
NEFMC	**8**	**N/A**	**4**	**4**	**8**	**16**	**2**
MAFMC	12	N/A	9	2.5	11.5	24.5	2.5
SAFMC	12	N/A	4.5	4	8.5	21	1.5
Average	*10.5*	*N/A*	*5.75*	*3.5*	*9.25*	*20.5*	*2*

When viewed in this context, NEFMC is the leader when it comes to efficiency in proposing and enacting framework actions but is among the slowest when it comes to proposing and enacting amendment actions. The largest difference among the timelines analyzed was in the initial stages of amendment actions.0F NEFMC takes nearly twice as many months in this period, as the average was twenty three months among the benchmarked groups. This is somewhat offset by NEFMC's efficiencies in developing and executing framework actions, as those are more common and a more agile and nimble response to implement changes in fishery management. Based on the action timeline analysis, NEMFC's current approach is to use the framework process whenever possible to develop more numerous, but faster moving, actions; the last amendment action completed by NEFMC was in December of 2022. However, large scale, complex fishery actions necessitated by changes in federal policy or Council management priorities may still necessitate the use of the amendment process in the near future. Therefore, the project team recommends that NEFMC develop a clear, consistent approach to initiating large actions that don't fit into the efficient framework process, focused on addressing the much longer than average time it takes for NEFMC amendments to clear the initial scoping and development stage.

Appendix C: Current Adaptive Management Approach

The Council utilizes several key approaches and processes to document and implement changes in response to unpredictable fishery trends, cycles, and the evolving management landscape. We reviewed and summarized how these policies and guidance documents relate to one another: the Council's *Statement of Organization, Practices and Procedures; Operations Handbook; Other Council Policies;* and the *Regional Operating Agreement*. The Council takes a multi-layered appropriate for addressing unpredictable changes and a shifting management landscape. It utilizes regulatory tools and written protocols to develop federal actions, which are supported by high-level strategic policies on risk and ecosystems and enacted through a formal collaborative structure with its scientific and regulatory partners.

Mechanisms for Scientific Adaptability and Risk Management

These processes are designed to quickly incorporate new data and account for inherent uncertainty in the marine environment and fisheries.

- **Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) Role:** As detailed in the *UPDATED_5_2025_Operations_Handbook-final.pdf* and the *SOPP-2023-FINAL-2-28-2023* (NEFMC website February 2025), the SSC's primary function is to provide ongoing scientific advice for management decisions. This includes:
    - Recommendations for Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC).
    - Reports on stock status and health, bycatch, habitat status, and social/economic impacts.
    - Providing guidance to ensure Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) are based on the best scientific information available.
- **Risk Policy Statement:** Documented in *5a.NEFMC_Policies_2018.pdf* (NEFMC website February 2017), this policy directly addresses the volatile nature of fisheries by:
    - Providing guidance on taking account of risk and uncertainty in FMPs and specification-setting.
    - Aiming to make fishery management more transparent, understandable, and predictable in the face of uncertain information and imperfect implementation.
- **Research Review Policy:** This policy outlines the process for the Research Steering Committee (RSC) to review and facilitate the incorporation of new research results into the management arena. This ensures that the Council's actions are continually updated with the latest scientific findings.

Management and Operational Flexibility

These are the operational procedures that allow the Council to develop and execute changes to management actions efficiently.

- **Ecosystem-Approached to Fishery Management (EAFM):** The *UPDATED_5_2025_Operations_Handbook-final.pdf* (NEFMC website May 2025) states that the Council's conservation and management approach is evolving to include the application of EAFM principles, which is a direct response to a changing management paradigm.
- **Action Plan Process:** The *5c.NEFMC_GARFO_NEFSC_OperatingAgreeement.pdf* (NEFMC website October 2014) establishes an Action Plan as a "roadmap and contract" for

developing and completing management actions. The plan's design ensures a structured, collaborative, and adaptable process by:

- Identifying problems and objectives.
- Setting a realistic timeline that can be updated as necessary during the development of a management action.

- **FMP Development and Review:** The Council's core responsibilities include a commitment to review on a continuing basis and revise as appropriate for the assessments and specifications contained in each FMP, allowing for continuous adaptation to new conditions.

Role of Plan Development Teams (PDTs)

The PDTs are the working groups responsible for executing the analysis and documentation required for change:

- PDTs develop management options and alternatives, provide technical advice and analysis, and are responsible for writing FMPs and actions (e.g., framework adjustments).
- They work closely with Oversight Committees and are specifically tasked with incorporating SSC recommendations (the scientific advice on changing trends) into management alternatives.

Operational Structure for Integrating Science

The Council's processes rely on a formal structure for collaboration between management, science, and regulation. This ensures that new information (i.e., the "unpredictable changes") is analyzed and incorporated into management actions.

- **Operating Agreement (NEFMC, GARFO, NEFSC):** This agreement formally defines the "respective roles and responsibilities" and the "process for collaboration" between the Council (NEFMC), the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO), and the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC).
- **Detecting Change (NEFSC Role):** The NEFSC is responsible for providing "scientific advice and analyses" and "scientific information on…the status of fish stocks and their ecosystems". This is the formal mechanism by which new data on "fishery trends" enters the management process.
- **Developing Responses (PDT Role):** As defined in the *Operations Handbook*, Plan Development Teams (PDTs) are the core operational units for developing management actions. PDTs are "appointed by the Council Chair" and are critically composed of "staff from the Council, NEFSC, and GARFO". This structure ensures that scientific experts (NEFSC), policy experts (Council staff), and regulatory experts (GARFO) work together to build the framework of adjustments that respond to new scientific information.

Integrating Science into Management Decisions

The connection between the SSC and the PDTs acts as the primary conduit for transferring scientific advice (derived from detecting change) into implementable management actions (developing a response).

1. The Role of the SSC: Scientific Input

The SSC's role is purely advisory and focused on synthesizing the best available science from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) and other sources.

- **Synthesis of Data:** The SSC reviews the NEFSC's scientific information on stock status, bycatch, habitat, and social/economic impacts.
- **Scientific Mandate:** Its key output is providing recommendations for the Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC), which is the maximum level of catch that can be taken from a stock while adhering to the Council's Risk Policy Statement. This recommendation ensures that management decisions account for uncertainty.

2. The Role of the PDTs: Operationalizing Science

The PDTs are the Council's working groups responsible for the execution and documentation of management changes.

- **Composition:** PDTs are strategically composed of staff from the Council (policy), NEFSC (science), and GARFO (regulation). This multi-disciplinary structure is key to integration.
- **Action Development:** They develop the actual management options and alternatives, such as framework adjustments to Fishery Management Plans (FMPs).
- **Crucial Task:** The PDTs are specifically tasked with incorporating SSC recommendations into these management alternatives.

3. The Link: Translating ABC into FMPs

The formal connection ensures the scientific recommendation (the "what") is translated into a legally binding action (the "how"). In short, the SSC provides non-negotiable scientific constraints (like the ABC), and the PDTs build the management structure around those constraints using their combined expertise. This operationalizes the requirement that FMPs be based on the "best scientific information available."

Step	Body Involved	Action	Connection Detail
Scientific Advice	SSC	Recommends the scientifically sound Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) level.	The ABC is a scientific ceiling that must be respected.
Development	PDTs	Develop management alternatives (e.g., season length, gear restrictions, quotas) designed to achieve a catch level at or below the recommended ABC.	The PDTs translate the ABC (science) into management measures (policy/regulation).
Review	Oversight Committees	Review the PDT's alternatives, ensuring they are technically sound and adhere to the SSC's scientific advice.	Ensures the PDTs haven't exceeded the scientific limits.

Core Regulatory Tools: Amendments vs. Frameworks

The Council's primary methods for responding to change are "Amendments" and "Framework Adjustments." The choice of tools depends on the scale and urgency of the change.

- Amendments (For Substantive, Long-Term Change):
    - **Process:** An Amendment is the "most formal, public process...to change a fishery management plan (FMP)".

    - **Application:** This tool is used for "substantive changes" to an FMP. This includes actions like modifying FMP objectives, changing stock status determination criteria, or implementing new, complex management systems like catch shares. This is the primary process for addressing large-scale, structural shifts in the "management landscape."
- Framework Adjustments (For Responsive, Unpredictable Change):
    - **Process:** This is a more "streamlined" action designed to be faster than an amendment. It allows the Council to "make adjustments to FMP measures" that are already specified in the plan.
    - **Application:** This is the key tool for addressing "unpredictable changes to fishery trends and cycles." The framework process is used to implement "annual specifications" (like catch limits) and "adjustments to management measures." The *Operations Handbook* specifies that these actions are developed by a Plan Development Team (PDT) and can be used for a wide range of measures, including setting quotas, modifying time/area closures, and adjusting gear requirements.

Strategic Policies for Anticipating Change

The Council employs several high-level policies to guide its decision-making process, especially when facing uncertainty.

- **Risk Policy:** The Council has a formal **Risk Policy** whose objective is "to provide guidance to the Council…when faced with uncertainty and risk". This policy directly addresses "unpredictable changes" by structuring how the Council evaluates "trade-offs" and selects "management alternatives" in the face of scientific or management uncertainty.
- **Conservation and Management – Ecosystem Approaches:** This policy represents a proactive approach to a "changing landscape" by establishing a goal to "manage fisheries…in the context of the ecosystem as a whole". This allows the Council to consider broader environmental changes, such as shifting stock distributions or predator-prey dynamics, in its management process.
- **Habitat Policy:** The Council's habitat policy guides its response to changes in the physical environment. It has a goal to "protect, conserve, and enhance essential fish habitat (EFH)" and details procedures for how the Council develops and comments on actions "that may adversely affect EFH".

Appendix D: Strategic Plan – Council Working Draft

New England Fishery Management Council

2026-2036 Holistic Strategic Plan

Working Draft - April 1, 2026

Photo Sources: Green Finn Studio and Adobe Stock Images.

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 8). 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, See NEFMC Website).

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.

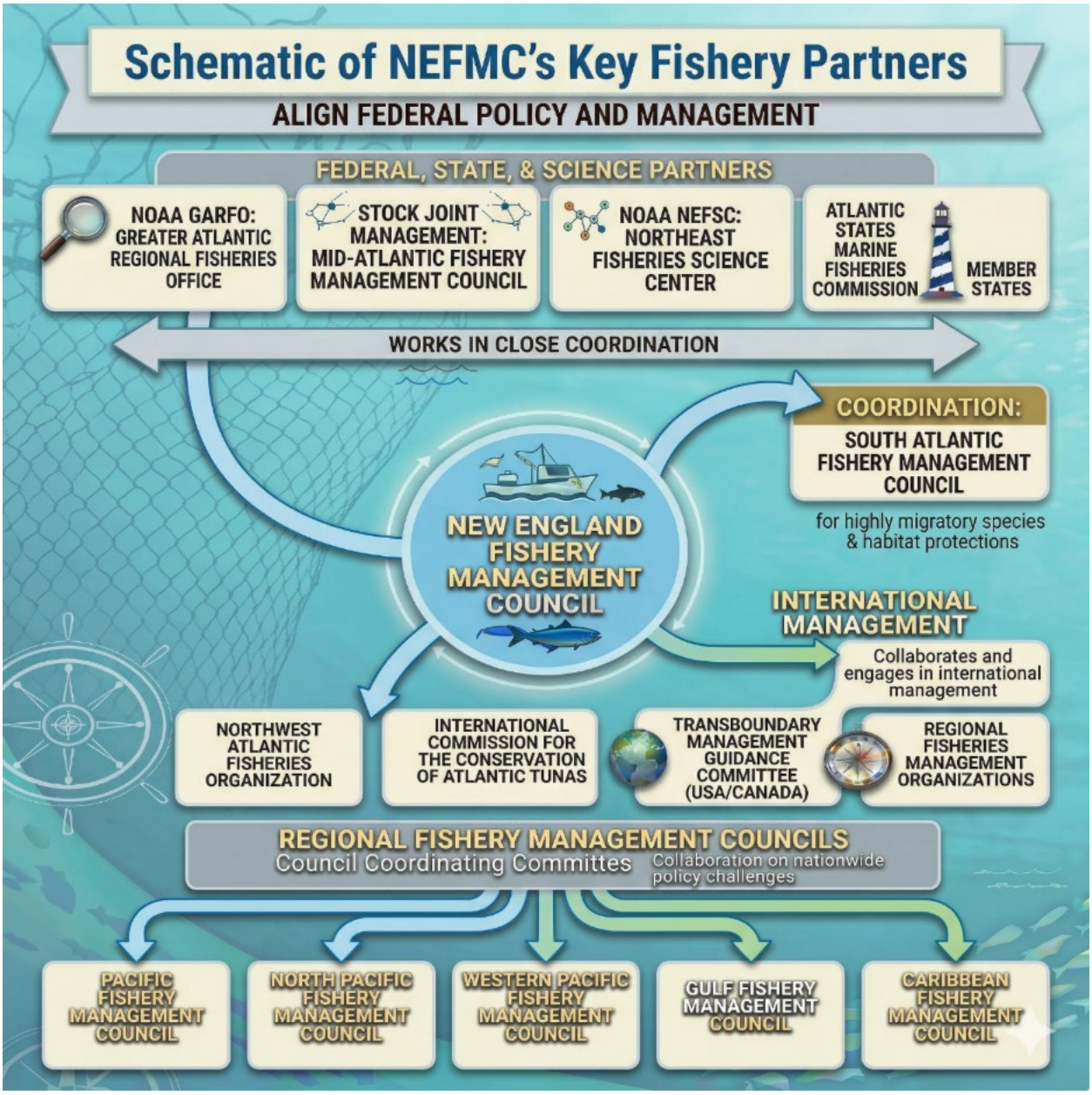


Figure 8. Key fishery partners of the NEFMC

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 E 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 E: 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 its mission outlined in Section 302(a)(1)(A). The mission 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."