

Small-Mesh Multispecies (Whiting)

APRIL 2026 COUNCIL MEETING



**New England Fishery
Management Council**

2026 Small-mesh Multispecies Action Work Plan



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Management Council

SUMMARY OF KEY TOPICS

- Process for 2026 management action
- Small-mesh multispecies management background
 - Bycatch allowances & letters of authorization
- Assessment data updates and risk policy
- Advisory panel comments on fishery performance
- Red hake possession limits
- Exemption area boundaries and seasons
- Proposed scope of management action



Small Mesh Multispecies (Whiting)

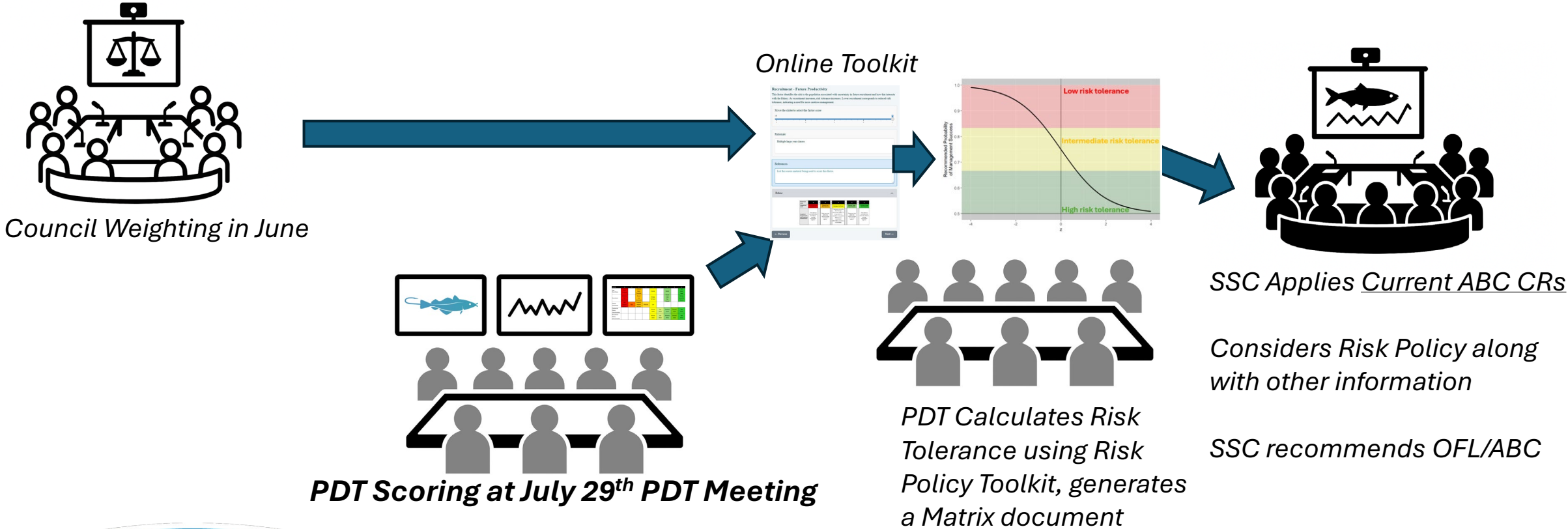
Council Priority	Jan – Mar	Apr - Jun	July - Sept	Oct - Dec
Whiting specifications 2027-2031, other management measures		Develop scope	Develop specifications and alternatives, conduct analysis, prepare document	
		Council: initiate action if needed	Council: update on action	SSC: OFL/ABC
		Council: final action		
Exemption areas review and evaluation	Review prior research; evaluate use of LOA; summarize existing measures	PDT/AP Data Workshop		
Risk Policy application	Risk Policy factor development	Risk Policy matrix and identification of data needs	Risk Policy factor scoring	

Updated April 6, 2026, NEFMC Staff

WHAT WILL THE SMALL-MESH RISK POLICY PROCESS LOOK LIKE?

PDT MEETING, REVIEW OF ASSESSMENT PRODUCTS, OCTOBER SSC MEETING

June	July	August	September	October
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PRIMARY FOCUS: SPECIFICATIONS

- **Current cycle: 2024-2026 fishing years**
 - Whiting – empirical assessment, catch at F associated with $P^*=25\%$
 - Northern red hake – ad hoc catch specifications based on trends
 - Southern red hake – 75% of catch specification to promote rebuilding
- **Update: 2027 up to 2031**
 - Data updates: catch and survey biomass, abundance at age/size
 - Ad hoc approach based on trends
 - Scientific uncertainty not estimated



SECONDARY FOCUS: OTHER MEASURES

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

- **Possession limits**
- **Exemption areas**
 - **Boundaries and seasons**
 - **Bycatch limit consistency**
 - **Letter of Authorization use**



Exemption Area History and Management Overview



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1991

Cultivator Shoal,
Southern New
England
exemption areas
open

1995

Small Mesh
Areas 1 & 2
open

1996

Mid-Atlantic
Exemption Area
redefined

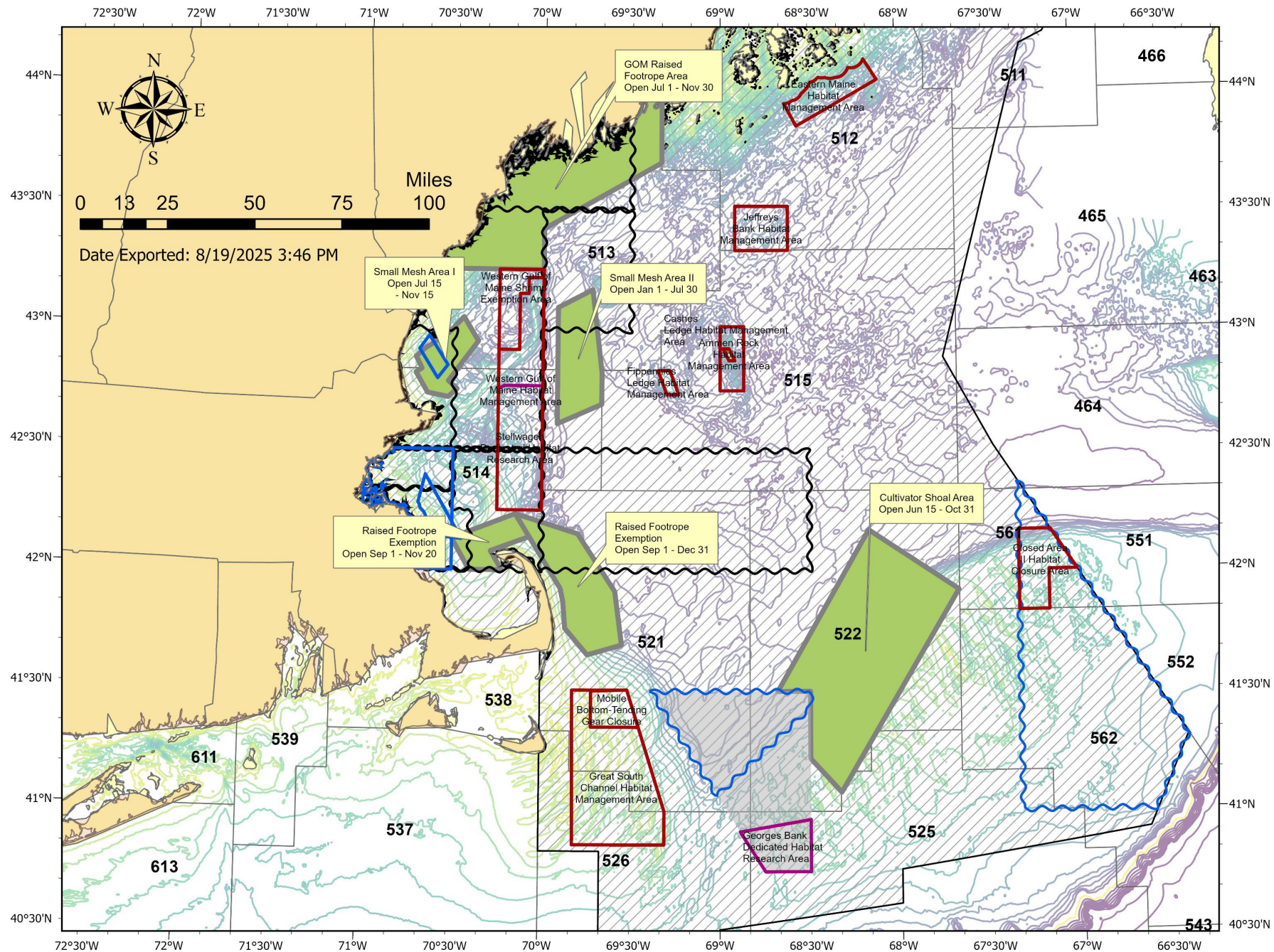
2000

Raised Footrope
Trawl (Cape
Cod) Area
opened

2003

Inshore Gulf of
Maine Raised
Footrope Trawl
Area opened





Exemption Area		Gulf of Maine Grate Raised Footrope Trawl	Cultivator Shoal	Small Mesh Area 1	Small Mesh Area 2	Raised Footrope Trawl Areas (Cape Cod)	Southern New England	Mid-Atlantic
Season		July 1-Nov 30	June 15-Oct 31	July 15-Nov 15	Jan 1 – June 30	Sept 1- Nov 20/Dec 31 (eastern portion)	Year round	Year round
Gear Requirements	Mesh size	Minimum 2.5” square or diamond	Minimum 3” square or diamond			Minimum 2.5” square or diamond	Can only land small-mesh species with trawl gear; minimum 6” diamond or 6.5” square mesh (vessels fishing under NE mult DAS or sector trip).	Trawl: may use <6.5” mesh if participating in exempted fishery
	Other	Raised footrope trawl with excluder grate; no sweep	N/A	Raised footrope trawl		Raised footrope trawl		Gillnet exempted fishery: only gillnet gear, minimum 5” mesh. Limited to 50 gillnets
Possession Limit	Red Hake	Northern: 3,000 lb	Northern: 3,000 lb	Northern: 3,000 lb		Northern: 3,000 lb	Southern: <5.5” mesh: 600 lb ≥5.5” mesh using small-mesh selective trawls: 1,000 lb	Southern: <5.5” mesh: 600 lb ≥5.5” mesh using small-mesh selective trawls: 1,000 lb
	Whiting (Silver/Offshore Hake)	7,500 lb	30,000 lb	<3” mesh: 15,000 lb ≥3” mesh: 30,000 lb		<3” mesh: 15,000 lb ≥3” mesh: 30,000 lb	<3” mesh: 15,000 lb ≥3” mesh: 40,000 lb	<3” mesh: 15,000 lb ≥3” mesh: 40,000 lb
Incidental Species allowed		Atlantic herring; Atlantic mackerel; Alewife; Butterfish; Squid	Atlantic herring; Atlantic mackerel; Butterfish; Squid; Longhorn sculpin; Spiny dogfish; Monkfish & monkfish parts; American lobster	Atlantic herring; Atlantic mackerel; Butterfish; Squid; Scup; Spiny dogfish		Atlantic herring; Atlantic mackerel; Butterfish; Squid; Scup; Spiny dogfish	Atlantic herring; Atlantic mackerel; Butterfish; Squid; Scup; Spiny dogfish (additional species listed in Doc. 2a)	
LOA Required?		No	Yes	No		Yes	No	No

PRIOR AP/COMMITTEE DISCUSSION RE: EXEMPTION AREAS

November 2023 AP/Cte meeting:

- Some discussion around changing exemption area seasons/boundaries; forwarded a recommendation to the Council, but was not included in IRA project proposal

November 2025 AP/Cte meeting:

- Suggestion to reexamine Small Mesh Area 2 and Cultivator Shoals Area (alignment with new habitat and groundfish management areas, adjusting dates of opening)



Letters of Authorization



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LOA USES

- **Enforcement:** used during enforcement operations to determine compliance with regulations; provide clarity for vessel operators
- **Observer Coverage:** Not used to assign observer coverage
- **Management:** One initial objective of LOAs was to allow NMFS to identify vessels participating in the fishery → simplified monitoring; some data analysis applications
- **AP Discussion:** Use LOAs as a reference when needed, present for enforcement purposes.



Bycatch Allowances



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BYCATCH LIMITS

- ***Small Mesh (<5.5 in) Prohibited*** by initial FMP (1985) to prevent bycatch of regulated species.
- ***Exemption Program Established*** that allows RA to exempt a fishery from minimum mesh size if bycatch of groundfish is less than 5%.
- ***Several whiting fishery exemptions*** have been approved in Gulf of Maine, Southern New England, and the Mid-Atlantic.
- ***Allowed bycatch species and limits*** vary between programs.
 - The GOM Grate Raised Footrope is the most restrictive.
 - The SNE Exemption Area allows possession of the most species.
 - Mid-Atlantic Exemption Area does not have bycatch limits.



Species	GOM Grate Raised Footrope Trawl	Cultivator Shoal	Small Mesh Areas 1 & 2	Raised Footrope Trawl (Cape Cod)	SNE*
Atlantic herring	X	X	X	X	X
Atlantic mackerel	X	X	X	X	X
Alewife	X				X
Butterfish	X	X	X	X	X
Loligo squid	X	X	X	X	X
Illex squid	X	X	X	X	X
Scup	X		X	X	X
Longhorn sculpin		X			X
Spiny dogfish		X	X	X	X
Monkfish		X			X
American lobster		X			X



****The SNE Exemption Area also allows small-mesh vessels to possess the following additional species:***

Swordfish	American shad	Bluefish	Shrimp	Blowfish
Spot	Hickory shad	Skate	Summer flounder	Tautog
Atlantic croaker	Alewife	Mullet	Weakfish	Cunner
Sea ravens	Four spot flounder	John Dory	Conger eel	Atlantic chub mackerel
Blueback herring	Tilefish	Ocean pout	Black sea bass	Sea robin



BYCATCH LIMITS

- ***Cultivator Shoal:*** Created by A4 with a 1% bycatch limit of regulated species based on experimental fishery data. Revised by A5, FW3, FW6, and FW9.
- ***Small Mesh Areas I and II:*** Created by FW 9 exemption supplement.
- ***Raised Footrope Trawl:*** Created by FW35. FW35 also prohibited possession of bottom-dwelling species, such as lobster and monkfish, to discourage vessels from rigging their gear improperly. Also applied to Small Mesh Areas I and II.
- ***FW37:*** Limited all GOM raised footrope trawl areas to possession of: Red hake, squid, butterfish, mackerel, dogfish, herring, and scup.



BYCATCH LIMITS

GOM Grate Raised Footrope: Created by FW38.

Incidental catch set the same as for the Cape Cod Bay raised footrope trawl, with one exception that possession of dogfish was prohibited.

FW38 prohibited the possession of monkfish, lobsters, and skates to ensure that the net is rigged correctly, such that the footrope is not in contact with the bottom, and thus much less likely to catch those species.

Possession of crabs, longhorn sculpin, sea raven, and dogfish was prohibited to reduce damage to whiting and to encourage fishing the net with the footrope off the bottom.



Scope 2026 management action



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SCOPE OF MANAGEMENT ACTIONS CONSIDERED

- Identify and recommend measures for the 2026 management action or potential 2027 management priorities
 - 2027 – 2031 catch specifications
 - Assessment data update, risk policy factor scoring
 - Red hake possession limit adjustments
 - Exemption area adjustments
 - Standardization of bycatch allowances
 - Letter of Authorization requirements
 - Exemption area seasons
 - Exemption area boundaries



OVERVIEW OF DATA UPDATES

- Why data updates?
 - Adapting to capacity constraints across the region
 - Faster incorporation of new survey & catch data
- Data Updates →
 - Update key inputs without rebuilding full models
 - Refresh advice using new survey and catch data
 - Improve efficiency and timeliness
 - August 3, 2026 deadline for NEFSC to produce report for PDT use



RISK FACTOR SCORING

1. Global Weighting



2. Scoring (data)

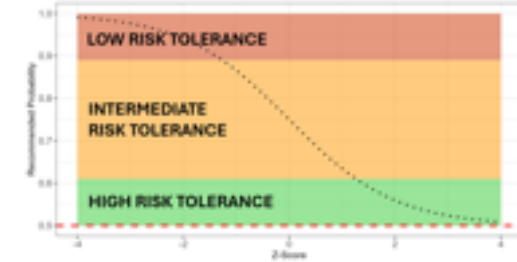


3. Z-Score

Combination of weights and scores.

$$Z = \sum (w_i s_i)$$

4. Risk Tolerance

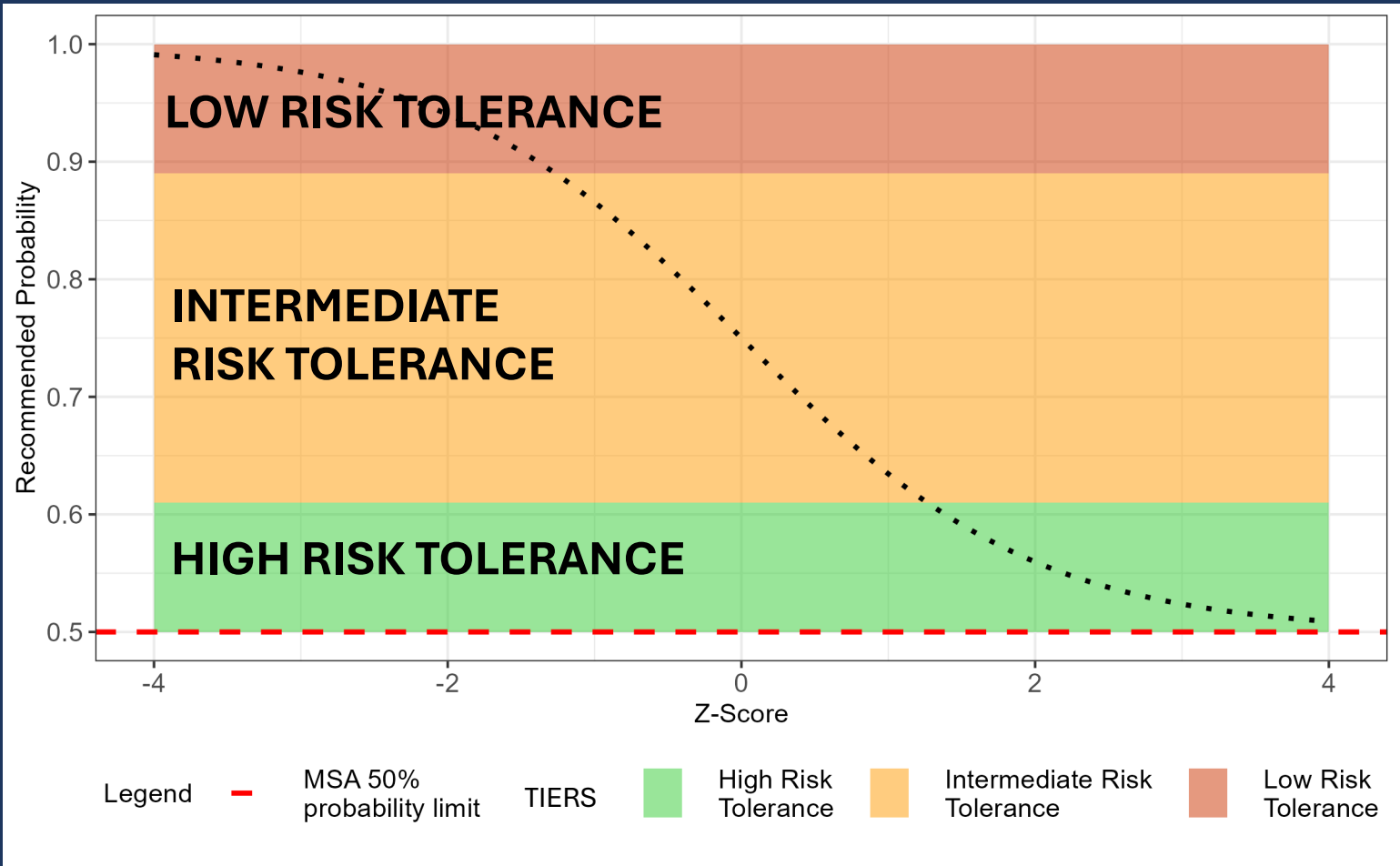


Weighting Guidance	Scoring Guidance		Qualitative Use
Rules and Process	- Commercial and Recreational Factors - Scoring Methods		- Design of Tiers - Interpretation – What do the Tiers mean?



4. DESIGN OF TIERS

Tiers created at points where the change in slope is steepest



Objective: Apply a structured way to interpret Risk Policy outputs for management discussions.

Design of the Tiers:

- Follow shape of the curve.
- Flat areas reflect “Stability”.
- Tiers transition at the greatest change of slope in the curve.

Application: Z-Scores (x-axis) plotted on Risk Policy curve translate to a recommended probability (y-axis).

Lower Z-scores mean lower risk tolerance.



Advisory Panel Report



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FISHERY PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION

Topics Discussed:

- **Offshore wind development:** traditional fishing grounds; may be impacts when operational
- **Markets/ economic impacts:** number of boats fishing, other fisheries, imports can drive price; newer frozen market in southern New England; Increased possession limit for <3” mesh led to more whiting landings, lowered price
 - Interest in changing possession limits
- **Whiting availability/ locations:** have seen more whiting in some SNE areas; large whiting in Area II; fish are arriving and leaving later; different timing in GOM due to water temperatures
 - Adjusting exemption areas could increase seasonal flexibility
- **Other fisheries/ species:** Scup fishery closed early, some vessels switching to small mesh, expecting impacts on price; gear-dependent skate bycatch
- **Future considerations:** offshore development (renewable energy, aquaculture, marine carbon dioxide removal); climate change (shifting distributions/timing); other fisheries (more participation in whiting fishery if other fisheries are less profitable)



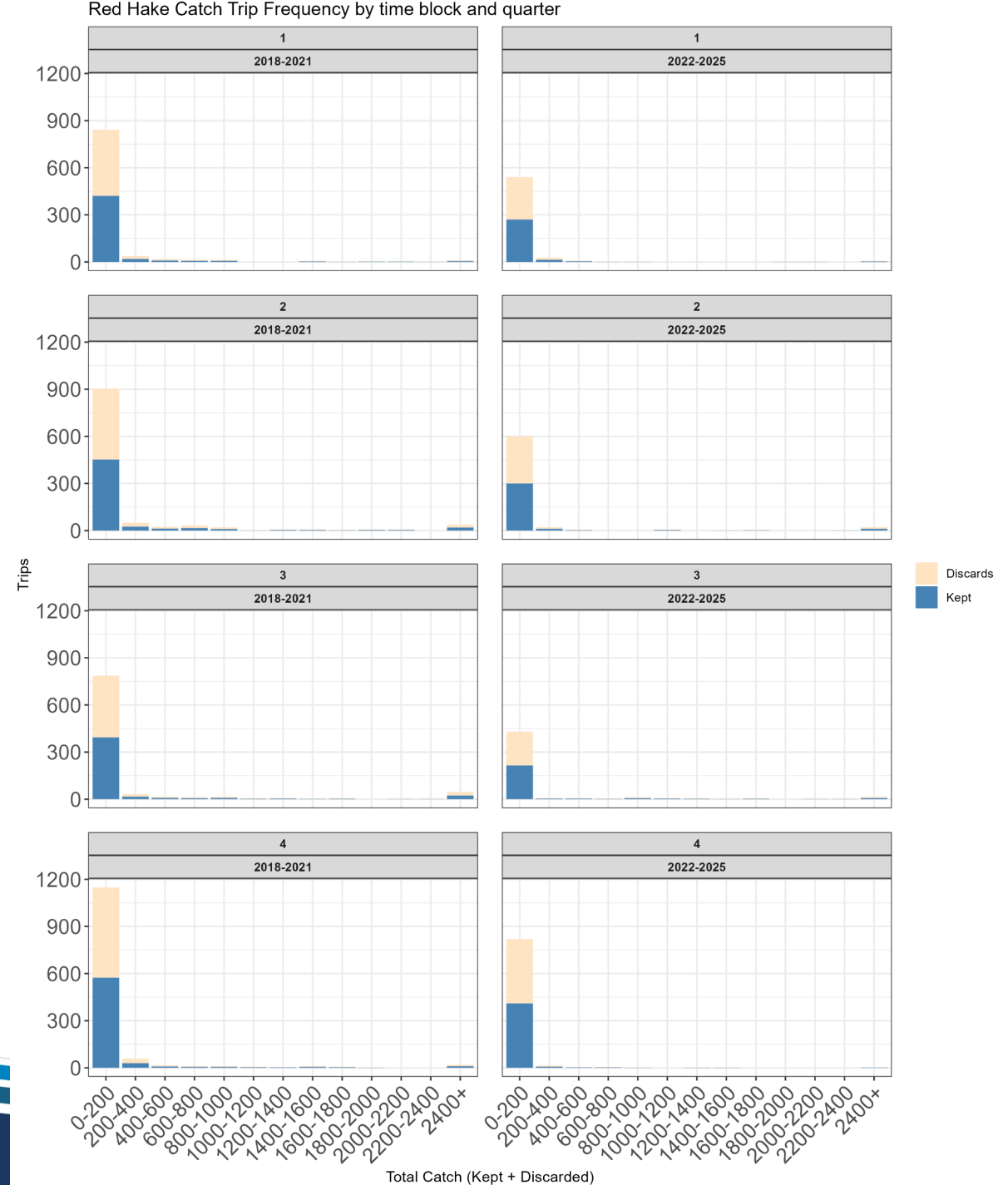
Red Hake Landings and Discards on Observed Trips



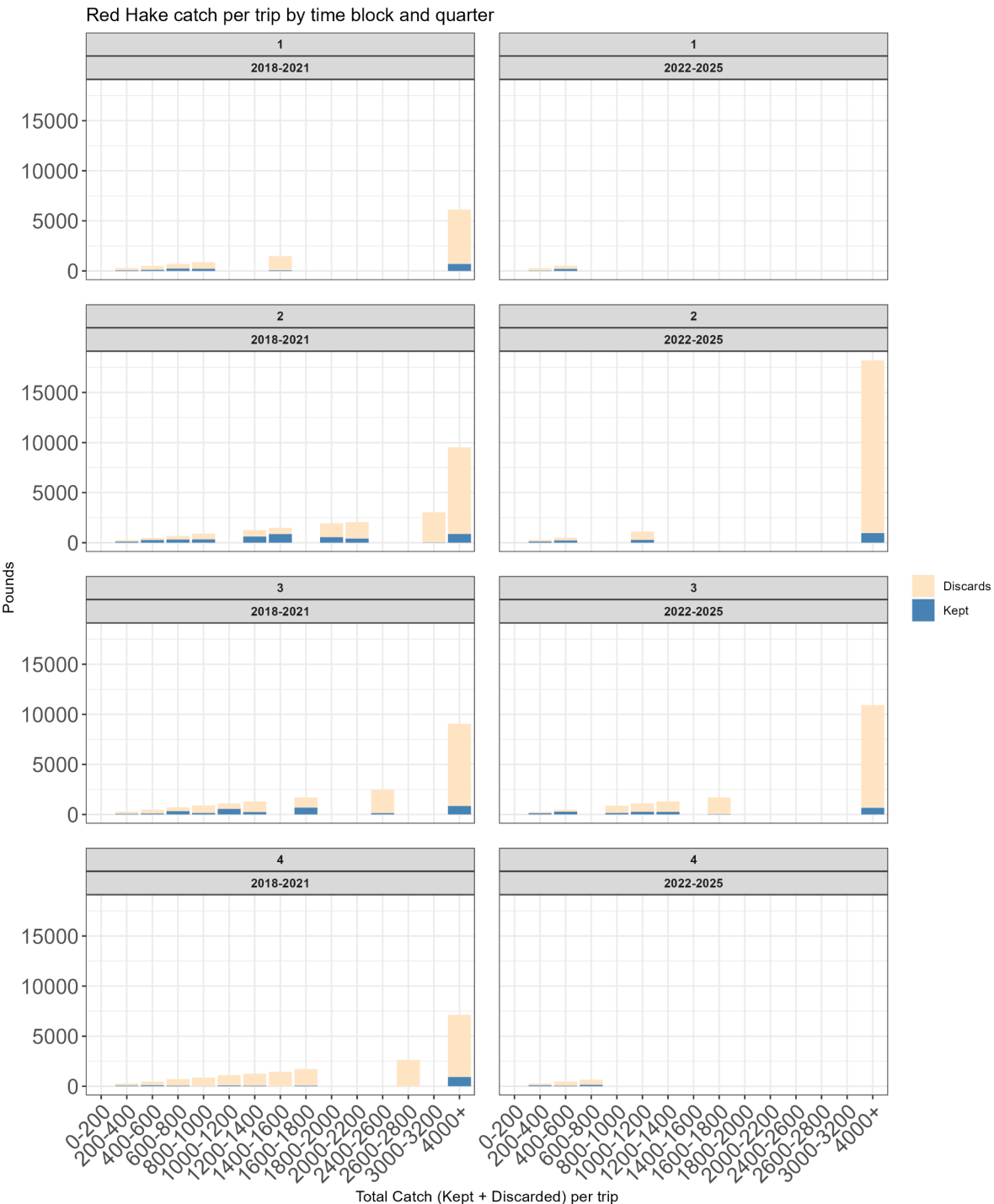
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Southern red hake **small-mesh** trips:

Number of observed trips in
2018-2021 and 2022-2025:
Catch of southern red hake,
discards vs kept



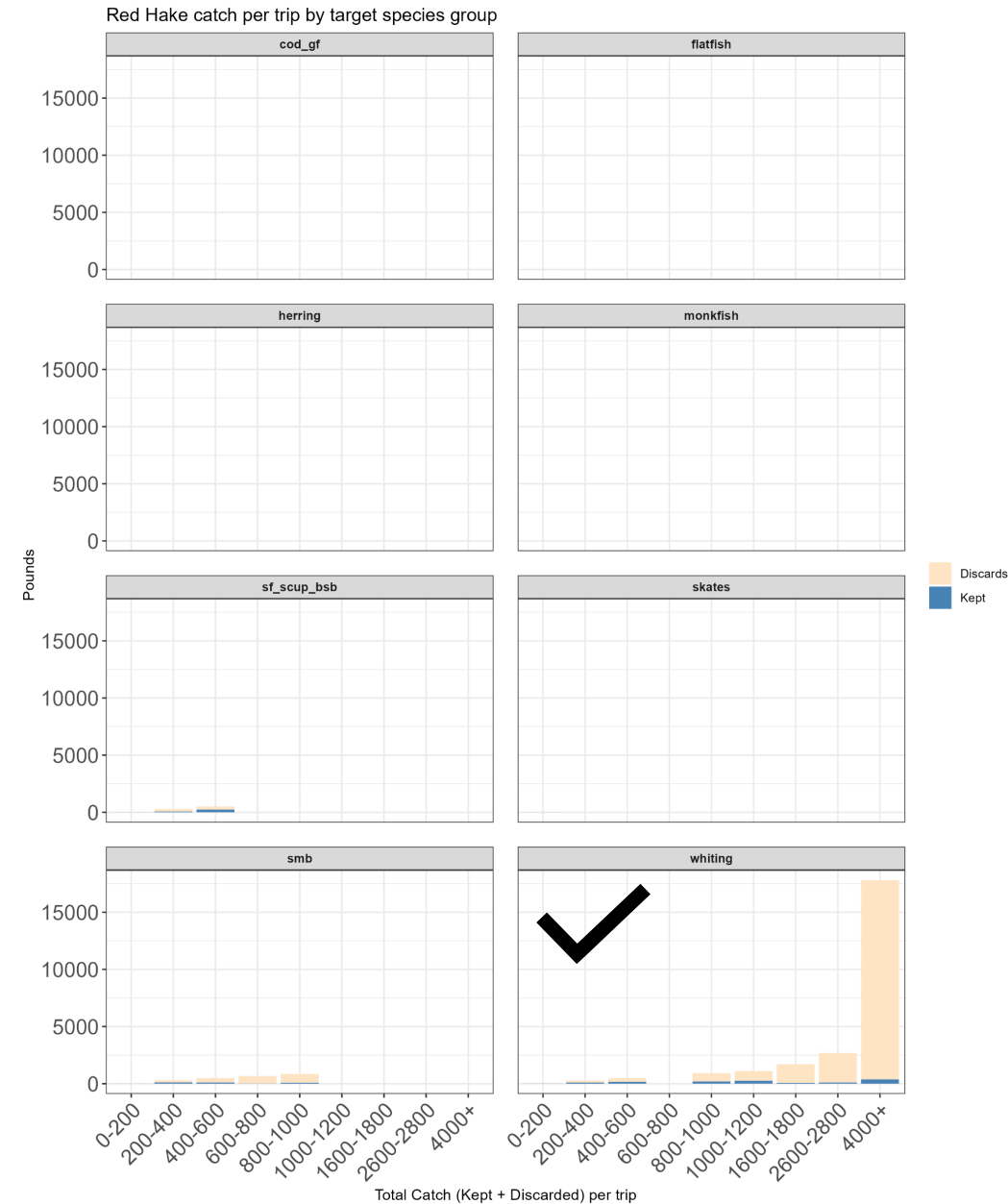
Catch of southern red hake on observed small mesh trips in 2018-2021 and 2022-2025 by category, discards vs kept



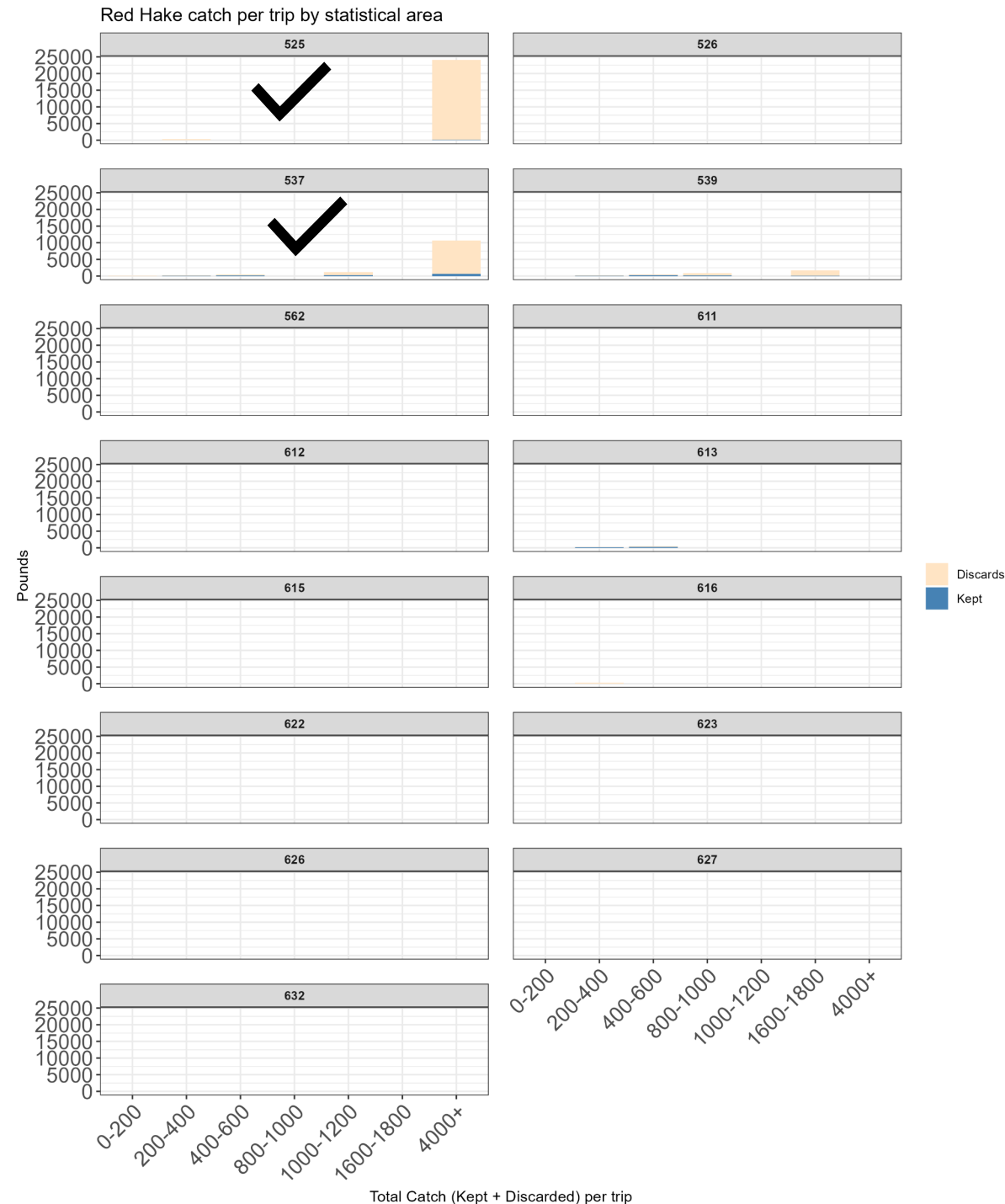
By trawl type



By target species group

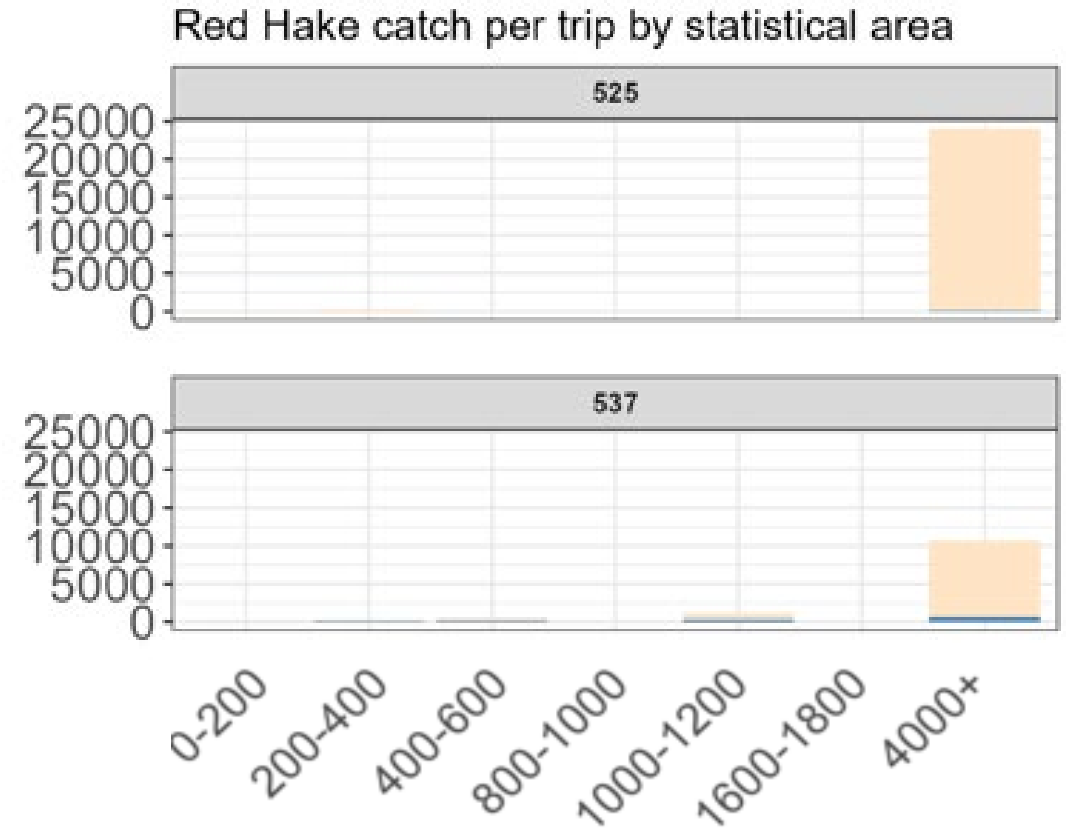


Southern red hake on
observed **small-mesh** trips by
statistical area – SA 526 & 537



Isolated high red hake catches on observed trips

- Regulations were cited as reason for discarding in a specific area and time
- Statistical areas 525 (151 trips – 97,913 of 379,721 lb) and 538, in quarter 2, by vessels using small-mesh bottom trawls (4 trips – 69,456 of 142,903 lb)



Southern red hake TAL triggers and catch history

Fishing year	TAL trigger	Discarded	ACL overage	Triggered?
2012	90%	48%	0%	No
2013	90%	55%	0%	No
2014	90%	53%	0%	No
2015	90%	72%	0%	No
2016	90%	70%	0%	No
2017	90%	68%	0%	No
2018	90%	77%	57%	Yes
2019	90%	79%	54%	Yes
2020	90%	80%	40%	Yes
2021	41%	84%	0%	No
2022	41%	81%	0%	No
2023	41%	87%	0%	No
2024	41%	89%	0%	No



LESSONS LEARNED LINK TO ANALYSIS AT COMMITTEE MEETING

- Few, if any, observed trips have red hake catches exceeding the possession limits
- A high proportion of red hake catches are discarded regardless of how much is caught
- Intent of the southern red hake rebuilding measures (possession limits: 600 lbs. or 1000 lbs. for selective and large-mesh trawls) was meant to cause fishermen to avoid areas with high red hake catches.
- TAL trigger not implemented since 2021; proportion discarded > 75% since 2018 and > 50% since 2013
- 3,000 lbs. possession limit in the northern management area might be raised to 5,000 lbs. for vessels with an active Letter of Authorization.

Additional details available in the [May 19, 2026 AP/Committee meeting presentation](#).



Exemption Area Fishing Analysis: Whiting and Large-mesh Groundfish Catch Ratios



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AP & PDT DISCUSSION

- Focus analysis on expanding existing exemption areas rather than creating new areas
- Align with updated management areas (ex. Small-Mesh Area II western boundary and WGOM closed area)
- Interest in southern portion of Cultivator Shoal (former Closed Area I cutout), Small-Mesh Area II
 - Changes to Small-Mesh Area I more challenging due to presence of lobster gear, hard bottom, and groundfish species

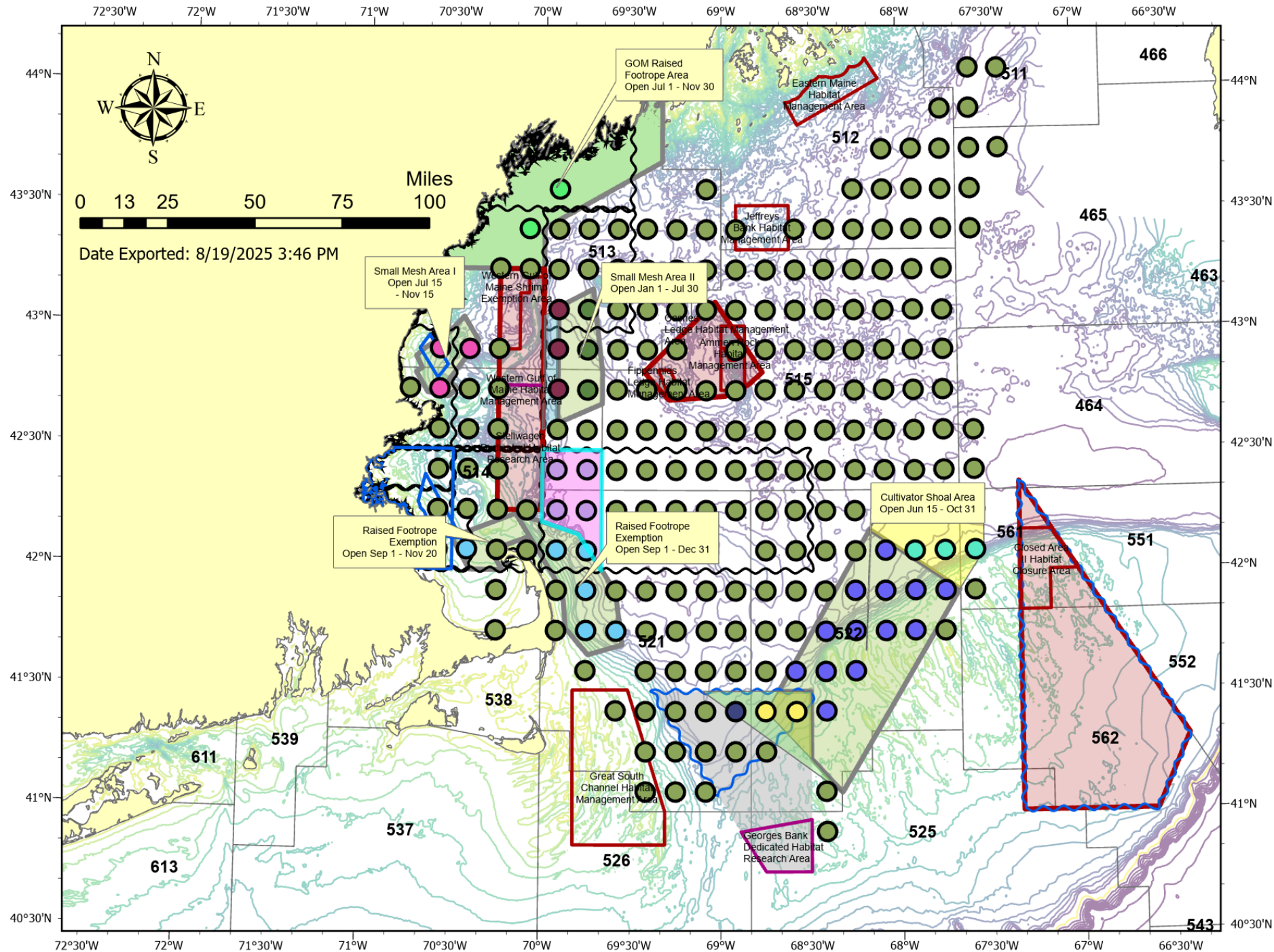


BOUNDARIES AND SEASONS: EXPLORATION OF SMS TO GFLM CATCHES

- Observed haul data (2021-2025) – more promising than CAMS or Survey data.
 - Hotspots for trips using large mesh can be identified in time and space
 - Are there months and places where the SMS catch is relatively high, compared with large-mesh groundfish catch?
 - Considerations
 - Threshold? Minimum number of observed hauls/trips?
 - Consistency? Catch variation?
 - Selectivity? Different threshold for large vs. small mesh?



Data assignment to exemption areas and alternatives



ADJUSTMENTS TO EXEMPTION AREAS

- Alternatives are areas and seasons where the small-mesh multispecies to groundfish catch ratios were higher than elsewhere
 - Large-mesh vs. small-mesh selectivity
- Closed Area I and Western Gulf of Maine area boundaries changed; consistency with new management
- Greater flexibility to choose when and where to fish
 - Ability of industry to target whiting when they appear
 - Reduce fishing costs
 - Expand opportunity to respond to market pricing
- Monkfish and lobster possession limit consistency with non-target regulations in other fisheries



Possible Management Measures for 2026 or a Future Action



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COUNCIL DEFINES SCOPE OF MANAGEMENT ACTION

- Identify and recommend measures for the 2026 management action or potential 2027 management priorities
 - 2027 – 2031 catch specifications
 - Assessment data update, risk policy factor scoring
 - Red hake possession limit adjustments
 - Exemption area adjustments
 - Standardization of bycatch allowances – monkfish and lobster only
 - ~~Letter of Authorization requirements~~
 - Exemption area seasons – extend raised footrope area
 - Exemption area boundaries – modify CSA and SMA2



Specifications	Framework adjustment	Amendment
Status determination criteria and thresholds	Overfishing definitions and mortality targets (P* vs Z-score)	Limited access
OFL, ABC, ACL, and TAL specifications	Quotas, seasonal adjustments, participation requirements, & additions/deletions for experimental or exempted fisheries	Harvest control rules
Possession limits	Stock boundaries	
In-season possession limit triggers (TAL trigger)	Catch limit allocations, including seasonal and area limits	
	Biological reference points, including reference time series	
	SBRM provisions	
	Whiting DAS effort reduction	
	Any other existing FMP measures	

MAY 19, 2026 COMMITTEE MOTION

- *The Whiting Committee recommends to the Council that the 2026 small mesh whiting action include measures that would 1) set specifications for up to five years, 2027-2031 2) consider application of risk policy in catch setting process 3) consider a modification to red hake possession limit and AM trigger and 4) make various adjustments to Exemption Areas (boundaries, seasons, and consistency with bycatch thresholds) based upon analysis of large mesh-fishery catch ratios and other data.*
- Measures to be considered are specifications that are adjusted for risk factors that the Council has identified, adjusting the northern red hake possession limit from 3,000 to 5,000 lbs due to improved resource conditions, adjusting the southern red hake possession limit 600 to 1,000 lbs, adjusting the monkfish and lobster allowances for exemption area trips to be consistent with existing limits in other fisheries, consideration of exemption area expansion to the SW of the Cultivator Shoals Area and to the W of Small-Mesh Area II, and an extension of the raised footrope season to include January and February.

