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New England Fishery Management Council

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

DATE: September 17, 2025
TO: Council
FROM: Cate O'Keefe, Executive Director
SUBJECT: Executive Committee Meeting Summary – September 4, 2025

Attendance: The Executive Committee met via webinar. The committee members attending were Mr. Salerno, Ms. Griffin, Ms. Ware, and Mr. Pappalardo. Also attending were Council Executive Director Dr. O'Keefe as well as Mr. Jonathon Peros and Dr. Jamie Cournane from the Council staff. Mr. Mike Pentony from GARFO, and Dr. Jon Hare from NEFSC were also in attendance. Other Council staff and members of the public attended the meeting.

Agenda Items

The meeting began at 9:30 a.m. The Executive Committee reviewed the agenda and agreed to discuss the 2026 priority setting process in conjunction with other agenda items related to Council meeting preparations and Executive Order 14276. The Executive Committee agreed to meet in a closed session to discuss an internal staff policy.

1. Executive Director's Report

- a. **Budget Overview:** Dr. O'Keefe provided a budget overview to the Executive Committee. The final fund distribution for fiscal year 2025 occurred on August 20th, bringing the Council to 99% of its allocated funding for the year. The Council is now moving forward with state technical contracts, which have been delayed pending receipt of FY2025 funds. Several budget line items are currently underspent due to austerity measures in the face of ongoing uncertainty with budgets. Dr. O'Keefe explained that the 2020-2024 Cooperative Agreement Award No-Cost Extension (NCE) ends on December 31, 2025, and spending is on target to complete the grant. Beginning October 1st, new fiscal measures will be implemented, including half-day stipends for Council members when full business is conducted in under five hours and for travel days. Webinars will continue to be used as appropriate, including the January Council meeting, which will be held virtually. In light of staff commitments to external partnerships, there will be a renewed emphasis on prioritizing Council projects, which may result in reduced travel to other meetings and events. Council staff met with NOAA Grants Management to review all IRA-funded projects and consider the process for requesting a change in scope if needed.

b. 2026 NRCC Stock Assessment Schedule: Dr. O’Keefe reviewed the 2026 stock assessment schedule, which was approved by the Northeast Region Coordinating Council (NRCC) on August 20, 2025. Atlantic herring and Georges Bank haddock assessments are scheduled to be delivered at the June 2026 management track. In August, a series of data updates are planned for Atlantic halibut, northern and southern red hake, northern and southern silver hake, and witch flounder. Finally, management track assessments are scheduled for American plaice and Gulf of Maine haddock in September, and pollock will receive a data and projection update.

2. **Inter-Agency Upcoming Meetings:** Dr. O’Keefe shared details about recent meetings of interest, including:
- a. US/CA Steering Committee Intersessional: July 21, webinar
 - i. Introduction to Drew Lawler, NOAA’s Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Fisheries, who has assumed the role of US Chair of the US/Canada Steering Committee
 - ii. Preparation for 2025 Transboundary Management Guidance Committee meeting
 - b. TMGC Informational Session: July 23, webinar
 - i. Report received from Integration of Science Advice for Transboundary Stocks (ISATS) representatives
 - ii. Presentations of US and Canadian domestic stock assessments
 - c. MA Senate Hearing: July 30, Boston, MA
 - i. Dr. O’Keefe presented information to a joint hearing of MA Senate Committees about the US fishery management system, Council process, and scallop economic impacts
 - d. CCC Executive Directors Meeting: August 6, webinar
 - i. Discussion about aligning Council and NOAA priorities (following up from May CCC)
 - ii. Review of the work plan for the CCC NEPA Working Group
 - iii. Preparations for the October CCC meeting
 - e. NRCC Intersessional: August 20, webinar
 - i. 2026 stock assessment schedule
 - ii. Discussion of planning for 2027 and beyond stock assessments and scientific support
 - f. Upcoming meetings:
 - i. TMGC – Oct 1-2, Halifax
 - ii. US/CA SC – Oct 14, virtual
 - iii. CCC – Oct 15-16, virtual
 - iv. NRCC – Nov 5-6, Annapolis
 - v. ECCG – early Nov, virtual
 - vi. Ex Com – Nov 13, virtual
3. **Management Action Timelines:** Mr. Jonathon Peros updated the committee on management timelines. Mr. Peros reported that there are several ongoing scallop and groundfish actions. Adjustments were made to groundfish project timelines to prioritize the resubmission of Amendment 25, which includes cod-specific components of Framework 69. This resulted in

pausing work on several other projects to ensure completion of Amendment 25, which is scheduled for final action in September. Dr. O’Keefe noted that there has not been an update from NOAA Fisheries about the status of Groundfish Framework 69. The Executive Committee asked if other regional fishery management councils were experiencing similar delays, and Dr. O’Keefe explained that actions have been moving slowly in the review process at NOAA.

For Atlantic herring, the Council took final action on specifications for 2025-2027 in April and submitted the action in May. Mr. Peros reported that the Council is awaiting the publication of the rule. In April, the Council paused work on Amendment 10 to pursue a management flexibility action and plans to revisit its status during the 2026 priority-setting process.

The Council is scheduled to take final action on Monkfish and Skate specifications (2026-2030) at the September Council meeting. Mr. Peros reported that the On-Demand Fishing Gear Conflict Working Group is scheduled to deliver a final report in September. The Joint Alternative Gear Marking Framework is scheduled for final action by the Council in September, with the Mid-Atlantic Council expected to take final action in October. The Executive Committee noted that this action impacts the lobster fishery, and the Regional Administrator explained the relationship between this action and other lobster gear requirements that are set to take effect in 2028. The Council is also expected to take final action on EFH designations for Atlantic herring, monkfish, skates, and cod at the September meeting.

4. **Management Flexibility Omnibus Amendment:** Dr. O’Keefe provided an update on the Council’s Omnibus Management Flexibility Amendment. The amendment contains five actions: specification frequency, specification setting process, in-season adjustment authority, annual reviews/reports, and adding all accepted alternatives in the Amendment as frameworkable items for future action. Dr. O’Keefe explained that rollover and default provisions for the groundfish and scallop FMPs were moved to considered but rejected to maintain the streamlined nature of the action but could be revisited and analyzed in future actions for those FMPs. The Executive Committee discussed the in-season adjustment measures and inquired about the scope of changes that could be made within a scallop specification package. The Executive Committee supported staff recommendations for all action alternatives by consensus.
5. **Executive Order 14276:** Dr. O’Keefe provided an update on the Council’s work to address Executive Order 14276 and presented draft recommendations for the Executive Committee to consider. The Council will submit its response to EO 14276 to NMFS by September 30, 2025. Dr. O’Keefe explained that the response should be considered as part of the Council’s overall work plan with a commitment to doing the work in the near future. With this in mind, staff developed recommendations in four categories, including: 1) Council actions in the NOAA Fisheries rulemaking process; 2) Council actions currently under development; 3) possible new Council actions; and 4) non-Council actions (recommendations to Federal agencies). The Executive Committee asked about next steps following the transmission of the response to NOAA Fisheries, and Dr. O’Keefe explained that the CCC has requested clarification regarding next steps for items identified in EO 14276 following the September 30th submission deadline. She explained that for 2026, she is approaching the priority-setting process with the understanding that many of these

initiatives will be identified as multi-year priorities. This means they will likely be included in the 2026 priority list, though not necessarily initiated or completed within that year.

Executive Committee members noted that between the current commitment of resources to support IRA work, required work around specification setting, and a commitment to complete projects identified under EO 14276, there would be little time to address other work that the Council may be interested in pursuing. Dr. O'Keefe agreed with this assessment and noted that this will be the messaging to the Council in September. Dr. Jamie Cournane and Dr. O'Keefe offered responses and clarifications to Executive Committee questions about the four areas of recommendations, collaborating with the Mid-Atlantic Council, and the scope of input that was provided by Council bodies and the public. By consensus, the Executive Committee accepted all staff recommendations without change to be included in their recommendation memo to the Council.

6. **Council Meeting Preparations:** Mr. Dan Salerno reviewed Council meeting preparations. The meeting will begin with the swearing in of Council members and the election of officers. A public outreach session is scheduled for Tuesday, September 23rd. Mr. Pentony noted that NOAA Fisheries has received a Petition from the Center for Biological Diversity to list cusk as an endangered or threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Mr. Pentony explained that the first step for NOAA is to determine if the petition has merit.
7. **Other Business:**
 - a. Mr. Salerno noted that the 2025 management track assessment reports for redfish, white hake, and all winter flounder and yellowtail flounder stocks were available.
 - b. Ms. Griffin inquired about the SBRM prioritization protocol. Dr. Hare explained that the Center recently received its 2025 allocation of sea days and the observer program would be running the SBRM prioritization protocol. Ms. Griffin suggested that the Risk Policy Working Group should discuss this at a future meeting.
 - c. The Executive Committee met in closed session.

The public meeting ended at approximately 11:00 a.m.