



## New England Fishery Management Council

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Eric Reid, *Chairman* | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

## MEETING SUMMARY

### Habitat Plan Development Team

October 25, 2021

9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

#### *Agenda*

The PDT discussed (1) 2022 work priorities and (2) Northern Edge white paper progress to date and next steps.

#### *Meeting attendance*

PDT members included Michelle Bachman (Chair), Peter Auster, Sharon Benjamin, Jessica Coakley, Jenny Couture, Geret DePiper, Rachel Feeney, Moira Kelly, Julia Livermore, Dave Packer, David Stevenson, and Alison Verkade. Habitat Committee chair Eric Reid also attended. Other attendees included Sam Ascii, Travis Ford, and Kelly Whitmore.

#### *Discussion*

##### *2022 Council priorities*

Ms. Bachman noted two potential 2022 work priorities that differ from those approved for 2021. The Council may adopt one or both at the December 7-9 meeting. One new activity would be an action to consider a Habitat Area of Particular Concern (HAPC) designation related to complex habitats in Southern New England. The other would be an action to consider authorization of Atlantic salmon aquaculture in the EEZ, which is under the Council's authority as part of its Atlantic Salmon Fishery Management Plan (FMP). Related to the HAPC action, the PDT wondered if the description should specifically reference Atlantic cod, while leaving the habitat type(s) considered more general, noting that cod use other habitat types in addition to complex habitat. Related to salmon aquaculture, the PDT wondered what issues are considered by the North Pacific and Pacific Councils related to salmon culture in their regions, e.g., disease or escapement. Ms. Bachman noted that we would certainly look for relevant information or analysis within FMPs for other salmon species.

In mid-December, the PDT will discuss plans to complete these actions and other 2022 work if approved by the Council and as assigned. The possible need for an ad hoc committee or technical team, or potentially expanded PDT participation to address salmon issues, has not been determined yet by Council staff.

*Northern Edge White Paper*

A multi-year work priority is for the Council to consider developing and if desired, develop an action related to updated habitat management measures for the Northern Edge of Georges Bank. As a first step, the Committee will recommend to the Council whether such an action should be developed. The PDT had a lengthy discussion of the draft white paper being developed to support the Committee's decision making. Building on past discussions, the conversation included recommendations related to content, scope, and level of detail provided in the document.

The PDT reviewed the fishery considerations sections of the white paper. Fishing effort, landings, and revenue from 2017-2019 are presented in the current draft (the groundfish section has not been written yet). The PDT discussed adding data from 2015 and 2016 if needed to capture variation in fishing activity, if 2017-2019 and 2015-2016 are dissimilar. Data from 2014 and prior are included in the Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2 (OHA2) EIS. The group discussed streamlining these sections, or identifying a few key points from each, focusing on what has changed since OHA2. Additional information can be placed in an appendix or saved for later, as needed.

The PDT discussed the sections on fishing gear effects and impacts. (Additional synthesis of this content was already anticipated prior to the PDT's discussion.) Stepping back somewhat from the specifics of the gear effects studies, the group thought it would be useful to review the introduction of the document to ensure that it accurately conveys what the document is intended to do. Key issues to discuss upfront include:

- Is there new information that would lead the Council to re-evaluate the management regime on the Northern Edge of Georges Bank?
- Does the new information get over the bar of what is needed to approve changes to habitat management (to minimize adverse effects to the extent practicable within EFH and overlapping HAPC)?
- The introduction should also explain why the measures in OHA2 were disapproved by GARFO, and how new information could address concerns raised by the agency.

The PDT discussed that work on this priority is being completed in two phases: (1) consider whether to develop an action and (2) develop the action, if desired by the Council. The PDT agreed that we should provide some contextual information during the first phase without providing unnecessary details, however, there was some debate as to what is necessary/useful for phase 1. One approach would be to identify and answer the most essential questions about fishing effects and any differences from our understanding at the time of OHA2, refraining on providing additional background unless the Committee is interested in learning more prior to making a recommendation about whether to initiate an action. With this streamlined and more focused approach, much of the fishery and fishing effort data would likely be withheld for the time being or moved to the end of the document or an appendix. For each piece of information, we should consider including or excluding it based on whether it is likely to inform phase 1 decision making.

**FINAL**

Ms. Bachman had hoped to discuss the specific findings of the gear effects reports and literature to identify important findings and begin a synthesis across these sources, but members were not prepared to have this conversation, so a follow-up call will be scheduled for mid-December. Meanwhile, staff will work on summarizing and synthesizing the gear effects studies and will rework other sections of the document to focus on the questions in the bullets above.

***Follow up items – staff will:***

- Poll for a conference call in December,
- Complete preliminary planning for 2022 work,
- Complete summaries of gear effects studies,
- Synthesize key findings of gear effects studies, and
- Revise and condense other sections of the whitepaper.

***PDT members will:***

- Review the sections of the draft white paper related to gear effects and come prepared to discuss overarching findings at the next meeting.

No other business was discussed, and the meeting adjourned approximately at 11:50 a.m.