



New England Fishery Management Council

50 WATER STREET | NEWBURYPORT, MASSACHUSETTS 01950 | PHONE 978 465 0492 | FAX 978 465 3116
Eric Reid, Chair | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

October 21, 2022

Dr. Jonathan Hare
Science and Research Director
Northeast Fisheries Science Center
166 Water Street
Woods Hole, MA 02543

Dear Jon:

On October 30, 2020, I sent you a letter requesting changes to the scallop assessment schedule that reduced the frequency of status determinations through CASA and SYM updates and focused on reviewing and updating the forecasting model used to set fishery specifications. Dr. Dvora Hart and the Scallop Plan Development Team (PDT) have worked to track the performance of scallop projections for several years but at this point a definitive decision on how and when to update Scallop Area Management Simulator (SAMS) model has not been made.

Given the limited time and considerable work that needs to be done to support the research track assessment between now and the spring of 2024, I do not recommend that a scallop management track take place as planned in 2023. However, given the overly optimistic results of the SAMS model forecasts over the past several years (see Figure 1), the Council requests possible updates to the SAMS model in the next year for use in the 2024/2025 specifications process. I believe that this can be done without adding substantial work for our staffs by leveraging the Council's scallop PDT and Science and Statistical Committee (SSC) next summer.

One of the challenges with the current process is that the Scallop PDT has five to six weeks between when survey data are delivered and when an OFL/ABC needs to be presented to the SSC. This is too short of a window for the PDT and the assessment lead to reconcile survey data and fully diagnose and treat possible issues with the forecasting model. The current process also results in asking the PDT and SSC to address several TORs that deal with model adjustments and recommendations for legal limits at the same meeting. A better process would be to consider changes to the model first (e.g., August 2023), and have the PDT apply approved changes when developing estimates for the OFL and ABC. For example, the PDT notes that the model has difficulty forecasting rotational areas that have been fished for several years and has identified underestimating mortality as an issue that could be resulting in overly optimistic forecasts. This type of issue could be examined before survey data are available.

While the TORs for the 2024 research track have not been finalized, my understanding is that the research track may consider a new forecasting model (GeoSAMS) for the scallop fishery that would replace SAMS. We are supportive of the Center's efforts to consider a new forecasting tool through this peer-reviewed process. However, the earliest a new forecasting tool would be used is the fall of 2024 when the Council considers specifications for 2025 and default measures for 2026, and there are no guarantees that the new model will be approved for use. Given several years of poor recruitment, declining catch limits, and reduced landings, it is critical that we do our best to deliver the most accurate projections possible for use in management. Focusing on our current projection model while the research track is underway could allow for immediate improvements without creating the burden of an additional management track assessment.

In lieu of a management track assessment focusing on the SAMS model, the Council proposes having the PDT focus on modifying the SAMS model prior to the start of the 2024/2025 specifications process (i.e., before August 2023). Changes to SAMS could be reviewed by the Council's SSC in August of 2023 when the PDT begins reviewing survey data. This would satisfy the Council's 2019 request and expedite updates that could help to improve the model's performance. The performance of the SAMS model is well documented in PDT reports and focusing on improvements should be the focus at this juncture.

Please contact me with any questions,

Sincerely,

Thomas A. Nies
Executive Director

Figure 1 - Comparison of scallop biomass from surveys with projected biomass from SAMS model for 2019 - 2022. SAMS area data are aggregated by region.

