



New England Fishery Management Council

50 WATER STREET | NEWBURYPORT, MASSACHUSETTS 01950 | PHONE 978 465 0492

Rick Bellavance, *Chair* | Cate O’Keefe, PhD, *Executive Director*

MEETING SUMMARY

Joint Groundfish Advisory Panel and Recreational Advisory Panel Meeting

Webinar

June 10, 2025

The Groundfish Advisory Panel (GAP) and Recreational Advisory Panel (RAP) met jointly on June 10, 2025 via webinar to discuss: 1) Essential Fish Habitat Framework, 2) Framework Adjustment 72/Specifications and Management Measures, 3) Industry Updates, 4) Redfish Sector Exemption Program Review 5) Amendment 23 Review Metrics and Indicators; and 6) Other business, as necessary.

MEETING ATTENDANCE:

Groundfish Advisory Panel: Hank Soule (Chair), Cassie Canastra Larsen (Vice-Chair), Ben Martens, Al Cottone, Gib Brogan, Bonnie Brady

Recreational Advisory Panel: Frank Blount (Chair), Jonathon Sterritt (Vice-Chair), Leo Chomen, Tony DiLernia, Patrick Paquette, Bud Brown, James Reilly

Groundfish Committee Chair: Rick Bellavance

New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) Staff: Robin Frede, Angelia Miller, Julian Garrison

In addition, about 31 other people attended. Among them were:

Jackie Odell, Geoff Smith, Melanie Griffin, Megan Ware, Paul Risi, and Michael Pierdinock (Groundfish Committee member); Mitch MacDonald (NOAA General Counsel); Peter Christopher, Mark Grant, Liz Sullivan, Heather Nelson, Travis Ford, and Laura Smith (Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO)); Paul Nitschke, Glenn Chamberlain, Colleen Rodenbush, Gabrielle Clardy-Pryor, and Greg Ardini (Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC)); Corrin Flora (Maine Department of Marine Resources (ME DMR)); Sefatia Romeo Theken (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game Deputy Commissioner); Libby Etrie and Gareth Lawson (Conservation Law Foundation); Evan Balzano (Maine Coast Fishermen’s Association); Mike Waine (American Sportfishing Association); Jerry Leeman (New England Fishermen’s Stewardship Association); Michelle Bachman, Jamie Cournane, and Connor Buckley (NEFMC Staff); Cory Blount, and Knoep and Lucinda Nieuwkerk.

The meeting began at approximately 9:32 a.m.

Note: the agenda was arranged to group topics pertaining to both the GAP and RAP at the beginning of the meeting. Following Industry Updates to share fishery perspectives, the remainder of the agenda was commercial fishery-focused with primarily GAP participation from that point.

KEY OUTCOMES

Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Updates

- The GAP provided initial feedback on the updated Atlantic cod EFH designations and suggested consideration for outreach or additional input sessions for underrepresented fisheries, particularly common pool participants.

Framework 72/ Specifications and Management Measures

- The GAP raised concerns about southern windowpane flounder FY2024 preliminary groundfish fishery catch exceeding the sub-ACL.
- The RAP supported establishing the regional administrator authority to adjust recreational measures for a longer duration than a single year.

Industry Updates – Quota Change Model Performance

- The GAP responded to discussion questions with input on additional information that could be incorporated into the Quota Change Model (QCM), including intra-sector lease prices, ex-vessel prices by size category, and market factors.

Redfish Sector Exemption Program Review

- The GAP generally supported the PDT recommendations for metrics to include in the review.

Amendment 23 Monitoring Review Metrics

- The GAP generally supported the PDT recommendations for metrics to include in the pared down list of review metrics.

Other Business – Enforcement Concerns

- The GAP expressed interest in having the Groundfish Committee request the Enforcement Committee address mesh size enforcement.

AGENDA ITEM #1: MANAGEMENT UPDATE

GARFO staff provided a status update on the draft proposed rule for Framework 69 that they hope will be available by early fall 2025. They also reviewed the emergency rule for fishing year (FY) 2025, emphasizing the need for swift action to avoid fishery closures.

The GAP Chair requested an overview of the current limitations caused by staffing reductions at the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) and resulting changes to the 2025–2026 stock assessment schedule. The Groundfish Committee Chair explained that staffing reductions at the NEFSC had prompted the Northeast Regional Coordinating Committee (NRCC) to revise the 2025–2026 stock assessment schedule. The GAP Chair also raised concerns about delays in funding the At-Sea Monitoring (ASM) program, which led to temporary contract interruptions and anxiety among sector managers regarding reimbursement; though they noted that as of this week the delay has been resolved.

The RAP Chair asked about the rationale behind the zero cod retention rule east of Cape Cod. GARFO staff explained that the emergency action was meant to ensure cod conservation and to allow for the fishery to open while providing time for a more comprehensive management decision.

AGENDA ITEM #2: ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT (EFH) UPDATES

Council Habitat staff presented updates on EFH designations for juvenile and adult Atlantic cod, including an overview of the designations updates process and a live demo of the R Shiny App for visualizing EFH map footprints and other products. Habitat staff sought initial feedback on the cod designations but also encouraged follow-up correspondence and informal meetings as appropriate.

Discussion on the presentation:

Discussion from GAP members focused on the practical applications of EFH designations. The GAP Chair clarified with staff that EFH designation updates will go through the Habitat Committee and advocated for further opportunities to provide feedback before the end of July. The Chair also expressed concerns about representation from common pool and other fisheries and encouraged staff to provide monkfish and skates EFH updates to interested GAP and RAP members.

GAP members discussed model outputs for cod and raised concerns about potential “false negatives” in low-trawl areas due to limited data inputs. There was a robust discussion around integrating lobster survey data, adjusting mapping to reflect habitat more accurately, and ensuring equitable input from underrepresented fisheries like the common pool. Members emphasized the need to consider changing fishing behavior (e.g., reduced inshore effort) and urged closer analysis of encounter probabilities and model assumptions.

The RAP had no comments, and no public comment or motions were made.

AGENDA ITEM #3: FRAMEWORK 72 / SPECIFICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES

Council staff presented on the draft scope of Framework 72, which includes FY2026-FY2028 specifications and management measures. The Council is expected to initiate the action in June. The presentation outlined Plan Development Team (PDT) recommendations for which stocks should be included and the rationale for excluding others (northern and southern windowpane flounder).

Discussion on the presentation:

Discussions focused on the Southern New England (SNE) cod stock and concerns about only specifying the sub-ACL approach for one year. RAP members expressed concern about the instability of year-to-year specifications and the challenges of reopening fisheries with limited data. They emphasized the need for a more consistent and forward-looking approach.

GAP members raised questions about the 130% overage of southern windowpane flounder by the groundfish fishery in FY2024 preliminary catch data and the implications for accountability measures (AMs). They questioned the accuracy of discard data used to support AM triggers for the stock and noted a potential disconnect between assessment updates and quota-setting recommendations. Members were critical of the continued use of constant averages and expressed concern that the stock’s apparent growth was not being accurately reflected in management measures. GAP members also emphasized issues with the economic consequences of quota limitations calling for more robust analyses.

AGENDA ITEM #4: INDUSTRY UPDATES

Fishery Perspectives

Council staff solicited observations from industry members on the state of the fishery. Advisors discussed current fishery conditions, including catch rates, market trends, and quota usage. They described marked reductions in catch, effort, and crew availability.

RAP members described in the Southern New England region poor recreational cod catch, shifting black sea bass distribution, low participation due to weather and regulations, and a notable increase in squid fishing activity. Advisors noted in Massachusetts Bay decreased interaction with cod, a decrease in trips targeting pollock, consistent winter flounder availability, and rising concerns over small fish dominating landings.

From the GAP side, the Chair noted a significant year-over-year drop in commercial groundfish sector catch and effort, with some owners tying up vessels due to poor crew availability and economic conditions. Specifically, there has been a 30–40% decline in trips and days-at-sea (DAS) used in their sector, alongside a 50% drop in catch compared to the same time last year, noting that 2024 had remarkably higher catch than previous years. He highlighted rising costs, with ASM and quota costs

consuming over 20% of fishery revenues. Another advisor noted the disruption to the start of the fishing year resulting from the uncertainty in implementing regulations impacted decisions on where vessels planned to fish and use their quota.

There were broad concerns about individual stock trends being masked by stable aggregate catch data. GAP members echoed concerns about quota availability, market unpredictability, and lack of incentives for investing in processing capacity (the latter particularly with respect to flounder species). Concerns were raised around Georges Bank (GB) haddock with the large decline in quota this year causing huge disruptions to this fishery, pollock with the potential for overestimating status of the resource and interactions with redfish exemption fishing, and increased halibut catches with the constraining quota expected for this year.

Public Comment:

Jerry Leeman, New England Fishermen’s Stewardship Association (NEFSA), highlighted serious concerns regarding the GB haddock fishery. He reported multiple calls during the opening weeks of the fishing year indicating that two-thirds of the quota had already been caught, forcing vessels to lease quota to continue fishing. This, he noted, diminished crew income. He also mentioned that vessel monitoring system (VMS) data from the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science (NCCOS) report reflected increased fishing costs, especially in the fall and winter when vessels must shift effort westward due to seasonal weather limitations. He expressed concern that the loss of GB haddock opportunities is forcing larger vessels into direct competition with smaller ones.

Lucinda Nieuwkerk (F/V Hannah Jo) emphasized problems with permit distribution, stating that approximately 75% of permits are not actively used on fishing vessels. This misalignment, she argued, drives up demand and leasing costs. She advocated for phasing out permits that haven't been used for over a decade. She also explained that the markets avoid smaller fish, especially smaller pollock, due to higher processing costs. She suggested increasing mesh sizes to allow fish to grow to a more marketable size before capture, which would add value and reduce waste.

Quota Change Model (QCM) Performance Presentation and Discussion

Greg Ardini (NEFSC) presented an overview of the Quota Change Model (QCM) performance in recent years and potential areas for modifications and improvement. The model aims to simulate fishing behavior under different quota scenarios using actual trip data, focusing on efficiency and ACE (Annual Catch Entitlement) usage. Mr. Ardini highlighted drivers of QCM performance including groundfish landing, ex-vessel prices, and ACE (quota) lease prices, and sought feedback from advisors on these factors and how these could be incorporated into the QCM through modifications.

GAP members questioned the QCM’s accuracy and data inputs, asking whether external shocks like COVID-19 were accounted for; Mr. Ardini said later years were used to avoid skewing results. Others raised concerns about the model's ability to reflect dramatic quota swings (e.g., for GB haddock), lease price volatility, and size composition impacts on marketability—particularly for pollock. The model currently excludes intra-sector leases and doesn’t fully capture socio-economic dynamics such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) purchasing programs or shoreside processing constraints.

GAP members also critiqued data lags and the inability to adapt to mid-season behavioral changes. The GAP chair emphasized discrepancies between model outputs shown throughout the presentation and GARFO data and urged a deeper comparison. The discussion pointed to the need for improved transparency, a centralized lease price marketplace, and finer granularity in both size and temporal data to make the model more useful for industry planning and Council analysis.

Public Comment:

Jerry Leeman, NEFSA, raised concerns that leasing prices for GB haddock were so high they prevented vessels from accessing other stocks due to a lack of quota. He noted this issue became evident early in the

fishing year and significantly impacted crew compensation. Overall, the seasonality of leasing prices and fish and/or quota availability has presented a challenge to vessels.

Jackie Odell (Northeast Seafood Coalition) emphasized that seasonal variability in lease prices—especially during winter months when weather reduces fishing opportunities—can disadvantage vessels that can't adapt quickly. She advocated for consideration of these socio-economic dynamics in quota modeling.

AGENDA ITEM #5: REDFISH SECTOR EXEMPTION PROGRAM REVIEW

Council staff provided an update on development of the redfish sector exemption program review, focusing on PDT recommendations for metrics to include in the review and challenges in data collection to be considered in the analyses.

Discussion on the presentation:

Concerns were raised about confidentiality rules that prevent reporting on sectors with fewer than three active vessels, particularly regarding operator- or sector-specific performance reporting. Advisors suggested methods to anonymize and still derive useful insights and encouraged more granular metrics such as revenue-per-haul or trip. Participants emphasized the need for redfish-specific economic indicators and attention to small pollock landings. Suggestions included using observer and sector data to refine analyses. There was no motion, but the discussion reflected a strong desire to improve data transparency while protecting confidentiality.

Public comment:

Lucinda Nieuwkerk commented that small pollock landings are disproportionately attributed to large vessels, potentially indicating an enforcement issue. She also noted a shift in pollock size composition beginning around 2014.

AGENDA ITEM #6: AMENDMENT 23 REVIEW METRICS

Council staff provided an update on development of review metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of Amendment 23, which increased monitoring coverage. Metrics focused on discard estimation, observer bias, cost efficiency, and coverage equity. Based on guidance from the advisors and Groundfish Committee from their March meeting, the list of metrics was narrowed down to 20 primary metrics that could be explicitly connected to impacts from Amendment 23.

Discussion on the presentation:

Advisors expressed concern about whether the review would sufficiently capture real-world impacts such as shifts in fishing behavior due to quota changes or observer learning curves. One advisor highlighted concerns with observer bias, especially how observer experience and gear type might influence discard estimates. He recommended comparisons between pre- and post-implementation data, as well as between human and electronic monitoring.

The GAP chair encouraged contextual interpretation of observer bias metrics and proposed pooling unobserved trips across years to address sample limitations. Participants emphasized the need to define “coverage equitability” clearly and to assess how consistently sectors are meeting monitoring targets. There were no motions or public comments under this item.

AGENDA ITEM #7: OTHER BUSINESS

Northern Edge/Scallop Fishery Petition

The GAP discussed a recent petition submitted to the Secretary of Commerce to reopen the Northern Edge scallop area, stressing the importance of following the Council process. Concerns were raised about the ecological importance of the area, particularly for cod, and the equity implications of reopening it for

scallop fishing but not for groundfish. Staff clarified that there is no further information on the status of the petition at this time.

Enforcement Concerns

The GAP chair raised enforcement concerns related to mesh size regulations in response to public comments received throughout the meeting. Specifically, Lucinda Nieuwkerk (F/V Hannah Jo) expressed that there are inconsistencies in mesh configuration across different sections of a trawl net. She suggested requiring consistent mesh sizes across net components to provide equity to other vessels and gear types fishing under the redfish sector exemption program.

An advisor suggested exploring simplified regulatory language to improve enforcement and compliance. Members proposed two paths forward: requesting the Groundfish Committee ask the Enforcement Committee to convene on mesh regulation issues, and gathering a summary of enforcement actions related to mesh compliance.

1. Groundfish Advisory Panel Discussion Statement:

The Groundfish Advisors in the meeting expressed interest for the Groundfish Committee to request the Enforcement Committee hold a meeting to discuss enforcement of mesh size regulations.

Note: The Groundfish Advisory Panel did not have a quorum after the lunch break. The Groundfish Advisors proceeded in discussion format for those advisors present (three).

The meeting adjourned at 3:45 pm.