



New England Fishery Management Council

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

MEETING SUMMARY

Monkfish-Skate Joint Committee

Hampton Inn and via webinar, South Kingstown, RI

September 17, 2025

The Monkfish and Skate Committees met jointly on September 17, 2025, in South Kingstown, RI and via webinar at 9:00 am to discuss: 1) Joint Monkfish-Skate Advisory Panel report, 2) monkfish and skate specifications actions, including recommending preferred alternatives for specifications and effort controls on Monkfish Framework 17 and Skate FY 2026-2030 Specifications; 4) 2026 Council priorities; and 5) other business, as necessary.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Matt Gates (Monkfish (M) Committee Chair), Scott Olszewski (Skate (S) Committee Chair), Robert Ruhl (M, Vice-Chair), Ted Platz (M, S Vice-Chair), Peter Aarrestad (S), Togue Brawn (M, S), Pete Christopher (M), Joseph Grist (S), Eric Hansen (M, S), Dr. Jay Hermesen (S), Jackie Odell (M, S), John Pappalardo (M, S), Paul Risi (M), Robert Ruhle (M), Kelly Whitmore (M, S), Jake Wiscott (M), Lisa Wooleyhan (M), and Daniel Salerno (NEFMC Acting Chair); Jenny Couture (Monkfish PDT Chair), Dr. Rachel Feeney (Skate PDT Chair), Emily Bodell, and Dr. Cate O'Keefe (NEFMC staff); Mitch MacDonald (NOAA General Counsel); and Dr. Jeff Kneebone (Skate AP Chair). In addition, about 20 other people attended.

KEY OUTCOMES

- **Monkfish Framework 17**
 - **Specifications:** The Monkfish Committee voted on two specifications motions, each with a different specifications length (FY 2026-2028 and FY 2026-2030), both of which failed due to lack of majority. The Joint Monkfish-Skate Committee had a lengthy discussion on setting specifications for five years and the desire to have a mandated review in the interim for any new information on fishery performance, data updates, etc.
 - **Effort controls:** The Monkfish Committee passed a consensus statement for status quo effort controls for both the northern and southern management areas and a recommendation to revisit effort controls in 2027 that considers fishery performance.
- **Skate FY 2026-2030 Specifications Action:**
 - **Specifications:** A motion failed on recommending specifications for FY 2026-2027. There were similar concerns as monkfish for setting specifications for five years.
 - **Effort controls:** Motions passed on increasing the skate bait possession limit by 5,000 lb (whole weight) and the skate wing possession limit by 500 lb, and to revisit possession limits in 2027 considering fishery performance.
- **2026 Council work:** The Committee recommended a list of 2026 priorities based on high and low priority, noting that a peer-review of the monkfish catch per unit effort (CPUE) project is the highest priority.
- **Other business:** Staff provided an overview of the Council's Omnibus Management Flexibility Action and reminded the Committee that the Council is soliciting for AP applications through October 3.

INTRODUCTIONS

The Committee Chairs reviewed the agenda. Council staff reviewed the 2025 Council priorities for the Monkfish and Skate FMPs, timeline for the monkfish and skate specifications actions, an overview of the Council's Omnibus Management Flexibility Action, and monkfish and skate fishery performance, including the FY 2024 annual catch limit accounting.

GARFO staff noted that NOAA will be sending an updated letter to both NEFMC and MAFMC that there is no longer an overage of the annual catch limits in the northern monkfish management area, thus, no need to trigger the accountability measure. This change was based on data corrections.

AGENDA ITEM #1: JOINT MONKFISH-SKATE AP REPORT

The Skate AP Chair recapped the Joint Monkfish-Skate AP meeting on September 16, including an overview of monkfish and skate fisheries performance, recommendations on the monkfish and skate specifications and effort controls, and discussion on the joint omnibus alternative gear-marking framework action. See the September 16th Joint Monkfish-Skate AP meeting summary.

A few Committee members asked about the discomfort for setting specifications for five years given uncertainty on the underlying data and the SSC's discussion. One member asked about the Council's Omnibus Management Flexibility Action and the frequency for setting specifications. Staff stated that typically, skate specifications are set every two years and monkfish every three years, and that with this new flexibility action, specifications could be set up to five years, which gives the Council flexibility to align specifications and make changes in specifications as new information becomes available. Staff understood the hesitancy around setting specifications for five years and explained that the intention is not to set specifications without evaluating the stocks in the interim and making changes as needed. Another member commented that if the SSC recommended status quo for the southern area ABC for FY 2026-2030, then the AP would have been okay with setting specifications for this longer time period. The AP's conversation focused on being allowed to catch more skates without dropping the price with any increase in skate trip limits; in other words, the AP didn't want to fish harder for the same paycheck. Several advisors wanted to revisit information sooner than five years due to concerns about the data and wanting to incorporate fishery performance information.

There was a brief discussion on the AP's comments on offshore wind, specifically if there was a change in catch composition and what documentation is available for any impacts on fisheries and fish species. The AP Chair noted that individual offshore wind project reports have survey results related to any changes in monkfish given most of the AP discussion related to steaming, with one advisor experiencing longer steam times while another did not. He also commented that there are many different types of surveys occurring and one survey was terminated due to protected species interactions; these surveys are not spatially expansive, so it is likely hard to detect any specific changes in fish abundance and distribution on a regional scale. Furthermore, the discussion around offshore wind also focused on why monkfish and skates are harder to catch in offshore wind areas, either potentially being adversely affected by offshore wind surveys or that the fish moved out of the area and thus not caught by the surveys. One of the advisors thought that monkfish may rebound now that offshore wind surveys are done.

AGENDA ITEM #2: SPECIFICATIONS ACTIONS: OVERFISHING LIMITS, ACCEPTABLE BIOLOGICAL CATCH, ASSOCIATED SPECIFICATIONS

Council staff presented the 2025 NEFSC data updates for monkfish and skates, the recommendations of the Scientific and Statistical Committee on overfishing limits and acceptable biological catches, and the draft specification actions.

Monkfish Framework 17

A Committee member emphasized that the SSC was concerned about setting specifications through FY 2030, that there was a lot of uncertainty in stock status, uncertainty regarding how the Ismooth approach

(an index-based approach for setting ABCs for monkfish) relates to monkfish catch, and how to use the NEFSC data updates without decision-making criteria in place. She asked who develops guidance on how to handle data updates in lieu of an assessment given this isn't included in the Council's revised risk policy and that the 2022 Northeast Region Coordinating Council (NRCC) guidance document has this guidance information for when there are substantial changes in stock trends, which is not applicable for monkfish this year. Staff thought that it is likely up to the Council to develop decision-making criteria across all its fishery management plans to be consistent with how data updates are used. The Executive Director explained that the Omnibus Management Flexibility Action would reduce constraints on the specifications setting process and allows for flexibility based on when there is new information for a stock and the capacity to make changes in management; the Council can prioritize any changes in management at any point and it is not the intention of the Council to set specifications for five years without managing the stock in the interim. Furthermore, the Council can task the SSC to review any new information and revise ABCs as needed. Another Committee member asked about the monkfish FMP's annual PDT review / fishery performance report and whether this review could be helpful in the interim years. Staff explained that the Omnibus Management Flexibility Action would remove this requirement because this report is only a requirement for a subset of NEFMC's FMPs and could be replaced by a more comprehensive approach to reporting across all the species managed by NEFMC.

There was a question on if the Council had to set specifications for five years because that is the SSC's recommendations. Staff and the Executive Director explained that the Council often asks the SSC to provide recommendations for multiples years and that the Council is not obligated to use all the years; often the Council replaces the last specifications period with updated ABCs based on new information. The Council is working on the revised risk policy and has an IRA project focused on ABC control rules, which will be helpful for evaluating any changes in ABCs from data updates provided in the future. This year's data update will serve as a baseline to assess any changes in stock condition in the future, should additional data updates be provided. The Committee member was concerned that the SSC made the FY 2029-2030 recommendations based on uncertain data.

A Committee member explained that having FY 2029-2030 specifications is important to keep the fishery operating, new information should be available before FY 2029, and that the coordinated effort between monkfish and skates and the IRA work gives comfort that action will be taken before any reduction in monkfish specifications. Another was concerned with the lower southern area ABC in FY 2029-2030, feeling that the Council hasn't paid attention to monkfish for many years, there hasn't been a recent monkfish assessment, the SSC is responding to the history of the Council, thus, is cautious, and that the monkfish and skate biomass are underestimated. Council staff suggested that the precautionary FY 2029-2030 years could be motivation for the Council to prioritize monkfish before those specifications become implemented. Another Committee member commented about the bias of overfishing historically occurring in New England, that there are many reasons for why the monkfish fishery has underperformed against its total allowable landings limit, and that the missing trawl surveys in recent years are reasons for hesitancy in providing catch advice in FY 2029-2030.

1. MOTION: PLATZ/ODELL

To recommend to the Council a northern monkfish ABC of 6,224 mt and a southern monkfish ABC of 5,861 mt for FY 2026-2028.

Rationale: The Committee is uncomfortable with setting specifications for FY 2029-2030 through this specifications process. There is much scientific uncertainty in the NEFSC data update, and the Committee is concerned with reliance on Ismooth-based methods for setting specifications for years four and five (FY 2029-2030). The SSC noted concern with making a recommendation for five years. This motion is consistent with the SSC and Monkfish PDT recommendations for FY 2026-2028.

Discussion on Motion

A GARFO Committee member wanted confirmation that overfishing limits would remain unknown and wanted more information on what would happen if the Council does not pass the Omnibus Management Flexibility Action first, which would allow specifications to be set up to five years, and if no subsequent action is taken. He cautioned that the monkfish regulations are somewhat unclear and that if specifications are only set for FY 2026-2028, there could be a rollover in place for FY 2029, but then specifications could be zero in FY 2030 if the Council doesn't take action. A Committee member explained that while he did not agree with the SSC recommendations, he believed in the Council to act within the next five years such that new information could be evaluated before specifications in the later years would be implemented. He supported the Council's interest in additional flexibility and suggested that it is better to have specifications in place to keep the monkfish fishery operating than not.

MOTION #1 FAILED 6-6-1.

Yes: Brawn, Christopher, Odell, Platz, Risi, Whitmore

No: Olszewski, Hansen, Pappalardo, Ruhle, Wiscott, Wooleyhan

Abstain: Gates

2. MOTION: PAPPALARDO/HANSEN

To recommend to the Council ABCs for northern and southern monkfish for FY 2026-2030 that are consistent with the SSC recommendations. The northern ABC would be 6,224 mt for each year and the southern ABC would be 5,861 mt for FY 2026-2028 and reduced to 3,766 mt for FY 2029-2030.

Rationale: This motion is consistent with the best available science and recommendations of the SSC and gives the Council the maximum available flexibility for setting specifications.

Discussion on Motion

A GARFO Committee member supported this motion because he thought it was better to have specifications in place than not specify anything. A Committee member was concerned about available resources and wanted flexibility, though she was worried about being able to make changes to specifications in the future if the Council isn't mandated to do so; she supported specifications with fewer years as a result. Another Committee member explained that the Council continues to deprioritize management of monkfish and skates and the Council needs a mandate to take action in the future. Lastly, a Committee member suggested that if this motion included a specific review in year 2 or 3, she could support the motion but otherwise, five fishing years is too long for setting specifications.

MOTION #2 FAILED 6-6-1.

Yes: Olszewski, Christopher, Hansen, Pappalardo, Risi, Whitmore,

No: Brawn, Odell, Platz, Ruhle, Wiscott, Wooleyhan

Abstain: Gates

Skate Specifications

A Committee member noted that the survey biomass index for little skate is depressed, there are downward trends for smooth, thorny, and rosette skates, and that winter skate seems robust. He cautioned that managing skate species as a complex does not make sense, imposes a cost on the fishery, and that winter skate should be managed with monkfish and little skate should be managed separately. He noted that the directed fishery does not interact much with non-winter skate species and that the monkfish

fishery primarily targets winter skate and occasionally some barndoor. Another Committee member explained that the lower survey indices for some of the skate species is why the SSC recommended a more precautionary approach in specifications for FY 2028-2030. Staff explained that in theory, the fishery should be targeting mostly winter skate because that is the most abundant species and reminded that the biomass increase in the skate complex is primarily from the increase in winter skate biomass. Staff clarified that the Council has not changed management to be species-specific because skate data have many known errors (e.g., difficulty in differentiating between skate species).

3. MOTION: PLATZ/ODELL

To recommend to the Council the skate ABCs that the SSC recommended for FY 2026 and 2027. The ABC would be 41,282 mt.

Rationale: As with the first monkfish motion, the Committee wants to ensure that skate fishery specifications are revisited for FY 2028, to ensure sufficient attention is paid to this fishery. While there is an interest in aligning the timing of setting monkfish and skate specifications, the Committee is hesitant to recommend a reduction for skates in FY 2028 currently. The Committee expects that the ongoing work to evaluate potential joint management of monkfish and skate will help determine whether to align the timing of specification setting.

Discussion on Motion

A Monkfish Committee member suggested syncing the number of skate specifications years with monkfish specifications, specifically extending the skate specifications through FY 2028. The maker of the motion explained that he chose not to do that because in FY 2028, the SSC's recommendations for skate specifications would decline by 10%, which he disagreed with. He also explained that the IRA governance project could look at this coordination, and he has been discussing this idea of combining monkfish and skates with the Council since 2012 when he was on the AP but that the Council process is slow and there is a more immediate need to avoid any reductions in quota from both the monkfish and skate fisheries. Another Skate Committee member thought syncing the specifications cycle between skates and monkfish made sense. There was a brief discussion on the rollover regulations for skates and monkfish and that if the Skate Committee only specifies ABCs for two years (FY 2026-2027), then there would be status quo rollover specifications in place for FY 2028. The Council's Executive Director and another Committee member explained that rollover regulations are intended to serve as a stopgap should there be delays in implementation of specifications, not for the reason explained by the maker of the motion. Another Committee member thought that this discussion was not the direction what the Council is trying to accomplish considering the Omnibus Management Flexibility Action and could not support this motion.

MOTION #3 FAILED 4-4-1.

Yes: Brawn, Hermsen, Odell, Platz

No: Aarrestad, Hansen, Pappalardo, Whitmore

Abstain: Olszewski

AGENDA ITEM #3: SPECIFICATIONS ACTIONS: EFFORT CONTROLS

Council staff reviewed tasking completed by the Joint Monkfish/Skate Plan Development Team on monkfish and skate fishery effort and overlaps. The Acting Council Chair stated appreciation for all the work done by the PDTs on developing this Committee tasking memo.

Skate Specifications

4. MOTION: PLATZ/PAPPALARDO

The Committee recommends to the Council: 1) an increase by 500 lb in skate wing possession limits for trips fishing on a DAS for each season, to 4,500 lb in Season 1 and to 6,500 lb in Season 2 (wing weight), and 2) to revisit possession limits in two years (in 2027) considering fishery performance.

Rationale: This motion is consistent with the Skate AP consensus statement. There has been some concern about recent price softening of wing landings with increased possession limits, so the Committee supports a moderate increase currently. The Committee wants to avoid a large jump in landings to not crash the fishery. This gives an opportunity for processors to expand the market without needing to waste fish due to flooding the market.

Discussion on Motion: There was a brief discussion on the current skate wing prices and that many vessels have shifted from processing the skates as wings at sea to landing skates whole. One member explained that fishermen are receiving \$0.39/lb for whole skates and \$0.95 for skate wings; the price has dropped by \$.25 during certain times of the year, when fishermen choose not to continue to fish for skates until the price rebounds. Monkfish catch previously offset these lower skate prices in April and May where monkfish prices were higher, though then the market eventually becomes saturated and the price drops in the summer. The prices generally start increasing in the fall again. Several Committee members thought a moderate increase in skate wing landings would be a good compromise to allow for more flexibility without saturating the market too much and lowering the price. There are only a few sizable processors remaining for skate wings due to the market and labor availability. Council staff noted that NOAA's Social Sciences Branch has annual price average values for skates, though, no seasonal information; staff will ask whether more granular price information can be provided to the Council. The Committee decided to not include setting effort controls for a certain number of years given this is not a requirement in regulations.

MOTION #5 CARRIED BY UNANIMOUS CONSENT.

5. MOTION: PLATZ/ODELL

The Committee recommends to the Council: 1) an increase in the skate bait possession limit by 5,000 lb to 30,000 lb (whole weight) for all three bait seasons, and 2) to revisit possession limits in two years (in 2027) considering fishery performance.

Rationale: This motion is consistent with the Skate AP consensus statement. The skate bait fishery has been well-managed and has not had overages. This increase would help improve the profitability of the fishery and would help mitigate the increased steam time around the wind farm areas in southern New England.

Discussion on Motion: No additional discussion.

MOTION #6 CARRIED BY UNANIMOUS CONSENT.

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6. CONSENSUS STATEMENT

The Committee recommends to the Council: 1) status quo monkfish effort controls (DAS and possession limits) for the northern and southern areas, and 2) to revisit effort controls in two years (in 2027) considering fishery performance.

Rationale: This recommendation is supported by the Monkfish AP and the Monkfish PDT.

Discussion on Consensus Statement: The Committee recommended status quo effort controls and a review in 2027 to be consistent with the skate motion.

AGENDA ITEM #4: 2026 COUNCIL WORK PRIORITIES RELATED TO MONKFISH AND SKATES

Council staff prefaced the 2026 priorities discussion that recommendations from the APs and Committees will be considered by the Council in December. Staff briefly discussed the ongoing Inflation Reduction Act project that is pertinent to monkfish and skates, the Executive Order 14276 de-regulatory item (specifically the recommendation from the Council's Executive Committee for monkfish), and mentioned that there are regulatory / required actions the Council must work on in 2026. Monkfish staff summarized the Monkfish Catch per Unit Effort (CPUE) meeting that was held for monkfish groups in July to raise awareness of this ongoing work and to help inform any discussion on 2026 work priorities.

A Committee member asked whether the Skate Committee would be involved in the IRA project focused on ecosystem component species given several skate species are potentially being considered. Staff noted that this work is just beginning and that species selection criteria are being developed; Committee engagement would occur in 2026 with any follow-on Council management actions likely starting in 2027.

The Joint Committee appreciated the Joint AP's recommendations on 2026 work and suggested some modifications to their ideas and additional ideas for the Council to consider during its deliberations this fall, before the Council finalizes the priority list for 2026 during its December meeting.

CONSENSUS STATEMENT

The Monkfish and Skate Committees recommend to the Council the following for 2026 Council work priorities to consider:

Highest Priority (in priority order)

1. Have the monkfish CPUE research peer-reviewed.
2. Explore options for moving from skate possession limits that are per trip to limits based on the number of DAS that a trip is charged. This could allow more trip efficiency and improve access to the skate and monkfish fisheries.
3. Create a skate wing RSA program to provide research opportunities for relevant fisheries. This would help forward research such as on discard mortality rates.
4. Develop a 3-season approach for managing the skate wing fishery.

Lower Priority (not in order)

5. Explore options for ways to reduce latent effort in the monkfish fishery.
6. Explore if the boundary of the Southern New England Skate Bait Trawl Exemption Area could be moved to the south (increasing the area).
7. Create skate wing DAS to replace Northeast multispecies DAS for fishing on skate wings.
8. Create a DAS leasing program for monkfish and skate wings to allow flexibility (once skate DAS are created).
9. Create an Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ)/sector management program for the monkfish and wing skate fisheries.

Note: For priorities #2, 5 and 6, the Committee does not recommend initiating an action in 2026 on these topics. Priorities #2 and 5 were recommended by the Joint AP.

Discussion on the consensus statement

Several Committee members suggested developing a white paper before undertaking a Council action for potentially controversial issues such as developing an IFQ program for monkfish. The Committee had mixed opinions on the IFQ program idea given the lack of consistent support from industry. Concerns were raised on latent fishing effort in the monkfish fishery and whether there was a need to determine a control date; the control date for monkfish is old and would likely need a new one if that is the desire of the Council, though establishing a control date is not required. There was a brief discussion on how latent fishing effort would be defined given some vessels are unable to catch monkfish in more recent years due to overabundance of skates while other vessels haven't fished for monkfish in many years, thus, those two types of vessels should be treated differently, for example. A Committee member reiterated that an IFQ program would resolve this latent fishing effort issue and would reduce the cost of managing the fishery.

A Committee member wants to create a dedicated winter skate fishery (vs. the skate complex fishery managed under one FMP) and have measures and future work apply to only this species. There was a lengthy discussion on how the Council manages the skate fishery – as a complex rather than as individual species – and how this could fit in with IRA project 4 (focused on joint governance across NEFMC, MAFMC, and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission). The Committee member explained that the difference lies with how the winter skate is processed, whether landed whole or if cut as wings while at sea, noting that many crew prefer to land skates whole. The Executive Director cautioned that any follow-on actions from IRA projects are unlikely to occur in 2026. The Committee member reiterated concern that monkfish hasn't had dedicated Council management actions in a while and that the fishery has changed the past decade and more work needs to be done to improve management. He continued to urge the Committee to consider IFQ as a Council priority as he thought this would be a permanent solution that would address many issues previously discussed including latent fishing effort. The member also explained that he didn't think it made sense to be able to land winter and barndoor skates in similar magnitudes (i.e., as a skate complex) given winter skate is more abundant and targeted by the fishery.

Regarding priority item #6, a couple of skate AP members voiced concern that they are no longer seeing groundfish where they used to, so it could be appropriate to re-evaluate whether the boundary for this exemption area needs to be changed. Regarding the priority item #3 and #8, one Committee member thought a small RSA program dedicated to the skate wing fishery would be beneficial, especially for winter skate, and that a leasing program would increase flexibility for both the monkfish and skate fisheries. He commented that the Mid-Atlantic fishermen were opposed to some of these ideas in the past because the fishery had just been rebuilt, though conditions and the resource has changed since then.

Regarding priority item #1, the joint Committee thought this was the highest priority given this work was intended to be peer reviewed as part of the monkfish research track assessment, which is paused indefinitely, and this remains a priority included in the Monkfish research set-aside work.

AGENDA ITEM #5: OTHER BUSINESS

Council staff described the process for reviewing Advisory Panel membership applications, gave an overview of the Council's Omnibus Management Flexibility Action, and reminded the group of the upcoming NEFMC and MAFMC (monkfish-only) meetings for final actions for both monkfish and skates. The Skate Committee Chair let the group know that he shared the AP member solicitation through the Rhode Island listserv and suggested other state representatives do as well.

The meeting adjourned around 3:00 pm.