



New England Fishery Management Council

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

MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 1, 2025
TO: Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC)
FROM: Cate O'Keefe, Executive Director
SUBJECT: **Terms of Reference – Overfishing limits (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish for fishing years (FY) 2026 to 2030**

TERMS OF REFERENCE

- A. Consider the results of the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's (NEFSC) 2025 data updates for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish and information provided by the Council's Groundfish Plan Development Team (PDT).
- B. Recommend an OFL and ABC for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish for FY 2026 – 2030 that will prevent overfishing, be consistent with the Council's groundfish ABC control rule and rebuilding plan for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish, and consider the Council's Risk Policy Statement and Concept.

BACKGROUND

Groundfish ABC control rule

The ABC control rule for the Northeast multispecies fishery management plan is:

These ABC control rules will be used in the absence of better information that may allow a more explicit determination of scientific uncertainty for a stock or stocks. If such information is available - that is, if scientific uncertainty can be characterized in a more accurate fashion - it can be used by the SSC to determine ABCs, these ABC control rules can be modified in a future Council action (an amendment, framework, or specification package):

- A. ABC should be determined as the catch associated with 75% of F_{MSY} .
- B. If fishing at 75% of F_{MSY} does not achieve the mandated rebuilding requirements for overfished stocks, ABC should be determined as the catch associated with the fishing mortality that meets rebuilding requirements ($F_{rebuild}$).
- C. For stocks that cannot rebuild to B_{MSY} in the specified rebuilding period, even with no fishing, the ABC should be based on incidental bycatch, including a reduction in bycatch rate (i.e., the proportion of the stock caught as bycatch).

- D. Interim ABCs should be determined for stocks with unknown status according to case-by- case recommendations from the SSC.

2025 groundfish data updates

In 2025, the NEFSC conducted data updates for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish (Documents 1a and 1b), including updates to the survey biomass indices, and fishery catch data. These were data updates from the prior assessments in 2022 that indicated that, as of 2021: 1) ocean pout was overfished and overfishing was not occurring, and 2) Atlantic wolffish was overfished and overfishing was not occurring. Ocean pout is in a rebuilding plan with an end date of 2029. Wolffish is in a rebuilding plan with an undefined end date.

Specification setting

The SSC last recommended specifications for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish on October 12, 2022 (Document 4a) for FY 2023-2025. The SSC has traditionally recommended specifications for these species at three-year intervals, but recent reductions in federal agency resources have highlighted a potential need for increased flexibility in management and regulatory processes. Thus, rather than recommend specifications for FY 2026-2028, the SSC is asked to make recommendations for a five-year period, through FY 2030 should future gaps in federal resources prevent the provision of updated data. The Council expects to take final action at its December 2025 meeting. Specifications are expected to be implemented on May 1, 2026.

Risk Policy

The Council approved updates to its Risk Policy Statement with a new Risk Policy Concept in September 2024. The Risk Policy aims to systematically account for factors that influence risk tolerance in Council decision making. Implementation of the updated Risk Policy began in January 2025 and is proceeding in stages. During the initial phase of implementation, the template for the Risk Policy Matrix (Documents 2iii and 2iv) has been revised to align with the factors in the Risk Policy Concept. The SSC can use the revised matrices in a similar manner to previous Risk Policy information.

INFORMATION

1. NEFSC Data Update Reports
 - a. *2025 Data Update: Unit Stock of Ocean Pout, Zoarces americanus*, September 24, 2025
 - b. *2025 Data Update: Unit Stock of Atlantic Wolffish, Anarhichas lupus*, August 27, 2025
2. Groundfish Plan Development Team
 - a. Presentation by Council staff
 - b. Groundfish PDT memo to SSC re FY 2026 – 2030 OFLs and ABCs for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish, October 1, 2025
 - c. Risk Policy Matrix cover sheet for groundfish stocks
 - d. Risk Policy Matrix for ocean pout
 - e. Risk Policy Matrix for Atlantic wolffish

3. *Framework Adjustment 69*, Affected Environment Human Communities (Section 5.7), [March 11, 2025](#)
4. Previous SSC recommendations regarding ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish
 - a. Meeting materials, [October 12, 2022](#)
 - b. SSC report, [November 23, 2022](#)
5. Correspondence (if any)

Background Documents

1. The Council's [Risk Policy Statement and Concept](#), implemented January, 2025
2. NOAA/NEFSC [2025 State of the Ecosystem Reports for the Northeast U.S. Shelf](#)