New England Fishery Management Council
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Daniel Salerno, *Chair* | Cate O'Keefe, PhD, *Executive Director*

MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 14, 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 several Northeast multispecies stocks for fishing years (FY) 2026 to 2030**

TERMS OF REFERENCE

A. Consider the results of the most recent stock assessments for groundfish stocks and information provided by the Council's Groundfish Development Team (PDT).
B. Recommend OFLs and ABCs for the following groundfish stocks for FY 2026-2030 that will prevent overfishing, be consistent with the Council's groundfish ABC control rule and rebuilding plans and consider the Council's Risk Policy Statement and Concept.
    1. Acadian redfish
    2. Winter flounder: Georges Bank, Gulf of Maine, Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic
    3. White hake
    4. Yellowtail flounder: Cape Cod/Gulf of Maine and Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic

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.

Assessments and status of several groundfish stocks

The most recent assessment results and updates to stock status are provided here. Management track assessments for several groundfish stocks were peer reviewed in September 2025. The peer review report includes Level 3 assessments for Acadian redfish, white hake, and GB winter flounder and Level 2 assessments for CC/GOM yellowtail flounder, and SNE/MA yellowtail flounder. Gulf of Maine winter flounder, SNE/MA winter flounder had Level 1 assessments (direct delivery to the PDT and SSC). Assessment results are provided here.

Acadian redfish

Acadian redfish was last assessed in 2023 via a management track assessment using the ASAP assessment model. The 2025 assessment used a WHAM that was developed and accepted by the 2024 Applying State-Space Models Research Track assessment. The 2025 assessment updates commercial fishery catch data, research survey indices of abundance, the model, and biological reference points through 2024. Additionally, stock projections were updated through 2028. Based on the 2025 assessment, this stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring, consistent with the results of the 2023 assessment.

Georges Bank winter flounder

Georges Bank winter flounder was last assessed in 2022 via a management track assessment that used a VPA assessment model. The 2025 assessment used WHAM that was developed and accepted by the 2024 Applying State-Space Models Research Track assessment. The 2025 assessment updated commercial fishery catch data, research survey indices of abundance, and biological reference points through 2024. Additionally, stock projections were updated through 2028. Based on the 2025 assessment, this stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring, consistent with the results of the 2022 assessment. This stock is in a rebuilding plan with a rebuild by date of 2029. According to the 2025 assessment, the stock is now rebuilt, but an official determination will be made by NOAA.

Gulf of Maine winter flounder

Gulf of Maine winter flounder was last assessed in 2022 via a management track assessment that used swept-area methods. The 2025 assessment updated commercial and recreational fishery catch data, research survey indices of abundance, the area-swept estimates of 30+ cm biomass based on the fall NEFSC, MADMF, and ME-NH surveys. Based on the 2025 assessment, the biomass status of this stock is unknown and overfishing is not occurring, consistent with the results of the 2022 assessment.

Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic winter flounder

Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic winter flounder was last assessed in 2022 via a management track assessment. The 2025 assessment updates commercial and recreational fishery catch data, research survey indices of abundance, the ASAP model, and biological

reference points through 2024. Additionally, stock projections were updated through 2028. Based on the 2025 assessment, this stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring, consistent with the results of the 2022 assessment.

White hake

White hake was last assessed in 2022 via a management track assessment. The 2025 assessment updates commercial fishery catch data, research survey indices of biomass, adds two additional surveys, and updates the ASAP assessment model and biological reference points through 2024. Additionally, stock projections were updated through 2028. Based on the 2025 assessment, this stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring, consistent with the results of the 2022 assessment. This stock is in a rebuilding plan with a rebuild by date of 2031.

Cape Cod/Gulf of Maine yellowtail flounder

Cape Cod/Gulf of Maine yellowtail flounder was assessed in 2022 via a management track assessment that used a Virtual Population Analysis (VPA) assessment model. The 2025 management track assessment used WHAM that was developed and accepted by the 2024 Yellowtail Flounder Research Track Assessment. The 2025 assessment updated commercial fishery catch data, research survey indices of abundance, the model, and biological reference points through 2024. Additionally, stock projections were updated through 2028. The 2022 assessment concluded that the stock was not overfished and overfishing was not occurring. The 2025 assessment concluded that the stock was overfished but that overfishing was still not occurring. The Council will be notified by NOAA if a new rebuilding plan is required once the official stock status determination is made. However, the assessment showed that the stock is not expected to be overfished in 2025.

Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic yellowtail flounder

Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic yellowtail flounder was assessed in 2022 via a management track assessment that used an Age Structured Assessment Program (ASAP) model. The 2025 assessment uses WHAM that was developed and accepted by the 2024 Yellowtail Flounder Research Track Assessment. The 2025 assessment updated commercial fishery catch data, research survey indices of abundance, the model, and biological reference points through 2024. Additionally, stock projections were updated through 2028. Based on the 2025 assessment, this stock is overfished but overfishing is not occurring, consistent with the results of the 2022 assessment. This stock is in a rebuilding plan with a rebuild by date of 2029.

Specification setting

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. In September 2025, the Council approved an omnibus amendment to its fishery management plans that includes an action allowing a specifications frequency of up to five years. 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. Presentation on the status of regional science and management by Council Executive Director
2. Presentation by Council staff
3. Groundfish PDT memo to SSC re FY 2026 – 2030 OFLs and ABCs for several groundfish stocks, October 14, 2025
4. September 2025 Management Track Assessment
    a. *2025 Management Track Assessment Peer Review Report*, October 4, 2025
    b. Stock Assessment Support Information portal*
5. Risk Policy Matrices for groundfish stocks (combined)
6. *Framework Adjustment* 69, Affected Environment Human Communities (Section 5.7), March 11, 2025
7. Previous SSC recommendations
    a. Acadian redfish and white hake
        i. Meeting materials, October 27, 2023
        ii. SSC report, November 13, 2023
    b. Cape Cod/Gulf of Maine yellowtail flounder and Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic yellowtail flounder
        i. Meeting materials, November 9, 2022
        ii. SSC report, November 23, 2022
    c. Gulf of Maine winter flounder and Georges Bank winter flounder
        i. Meeting materials, October 26-27, 2022
        ii. SSC report, November 23, 2022
    d. Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic winter flounder
        i. Meeting materials, August 25, 2022
        ii. SSC report, September 13, 2022
8. 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

* The NEFSC Stock Assessment Support Information portal includes reports, presentations, and supporting materials for all NEFSC stock assessments. Use the drop-down menus to access information. A screenshot example is provided here: