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

November 6, 2025

The Honorable Seth Magaziner
United States House of Representatives
2nd District of Rhode Island
252 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-3902

Dear Representative Magaziner,

Thank you for your October 27, 2025 letter inquiring about the New England Fishery Management Council's (NEFMC) ability to sustainably manage fisheries under recent reductions in NOAA's personnel and funding. The NEFMC provided feedback as part of the Council Coordination Committee's (CCC) response to your letter earlier this year, and we appreciate the opportunity to provide updated information specific to NEFMC operations and impacts on regional fishing businesses and communities. In May, the CCC noted that the impacts of the reductions were not fully known at the time but were likely to affect a broad range of programs that contribute to sustainable fisheries management. We offer the following in response to your recent questions and as examples of how the reductions have impacted the NEFMC and New England fisheries.

1. *Given that the 2025 stock assessment schedule was altered in response to staffing and budget constraints at NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Center, how has this shift changed the timeline for fishers on the water and their ability to harvest on a routine schedule?*

Stock assessments that support NEFMC-managed species are scheduled in coordination with multiple partners through the Northeast Region Coordinating Council (NRCC), which includes representatives from the NEFMC, Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC), Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC), and NOAA's Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO). Coordinated scheduling is required as both Councils and the Commission share available regional NOAA resources. Due to the reductions in NOAA staff and funding, the NRCC negotiated a revised 2025 stock assessment schedule in May that included cancellation of several assessments and an indefinite pause in research efforts to support future assessments.

The stock assessment process directly informs the setting of annual catch limits and other management measures. In place of several 2025 scheduled assessments to support NEFMC management (monkfish, seven species in the skate complex, and four groundfish species), the NEFMC received fishery catch information and survey biomass indices from the NEFSC packaged as "Data Updates". This format of information had not been used by the NEFMC prior to this year and created challenges for the Council's Plan Development Teams (i.e., technical groups that provide options for catch advice) and the Scientific and Statistical Committee (i.e., science body that provides mandated overfishing limits and acceptable biological catch recommendations). The technical and scientific groups noted that the Data Updates did not

provide adequate information to determine stock status or forecast stock trends to inform sustainable management options. As a result, recommendations for catch advice were precautionary, which may impact economic viability of the fisheries.

In isolation, the changes to the 2025 stock assessment schedule and products may not result in changes to the timeline for fishery access at the start of the 2026 fishing year. However, precautionary measures may impact fisheries abilities to optimize seasonal harvesting and create "choke" stocks or seasons. Additionally, reductions in NOAA staffing at GARFO will likely result in delays in implementation of Council actions. We have already experienced unprecedented delays in implementation of groundfish (Northeast Multispecies Framework Adjustment 69) and Atlantic herring (2025-2027 Atlantic Herring Specifications) actions, both of which included increases of catch allocations for the 2025 fishing year but have not been implemented to date. Delays in finalizing catch advice can impact the fishing industry's ability to plan trips, maintain crews, and align with market demand.

In anticipation of potential further NOAA staff and budget reductions, the NRCC has already revised the 2026 stock assessment schedule. This change will result in the cancellation of most planned assessments to be replaced with Data Updates. Undoubtedly, reduced capacity to conduct stock assessments will result in increased scientific uncertainty and impact the NEFMC's ability to balance conservation and utilization objectives. Staff cuts and hiring freezes at GARFO have already and will continue to impact implementation of new management measures and could constrain fishing opportunities.

2. How have cuts to NOAA impacted your ability to implement Executive Order 14276, entitled "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness?"

The NEFMC submitted their response to Executive Order 14276 (EO 14276) on September 30, 2025. The Council identified four categories for potential actions, including 1) completed Council actions that have not been implemented, 2) Council actions already being developed in 2025, 3) proposed Council activities to reduce regulatory burdens and enhance economic profitability, and 4) non-Council activities related to other Federal agencies. As mentioned above, Council actions that would increase harvest opportunities for groundfish and herring in 2025 have not been implemented, and the Council emphasized that these delays are not aligned with the objectives of EO 14276. As a swift reaction to cuts in NOAA staffing and budget, the Council developed a Management Flexibility Omnibus action in 2025 with the objective of increasing flexibility in fisheries regulations to ensure that fishing operations are not disrupted due to lack of administrative resources. This action was passed unanimously by the Council in September with expected implementation in early 2026. The Council's new proposed measures related to objectives in EO 14276 include modernizing vessel capacity regulations, revising punitive payback measures for exceeding catch allocations when stocks are healthy, and overarching review and improvements across several Fishery Management Plans.

The Council is awaiting guidance from NOAA Fisheries on the EO 14276 response to understand expected timelines and prioritization metrics. The Council's ability to move these proposals forward will be highly dependent on available resources and support from NOAA partners at NEFSC and GARFO. Council staff are diverting time from policy development to fill information gaps left by NOAA's reduced analytical output and administrative review processes. Resource limitations have slowed the Council's progress on management actions directly tied to objectives of EO 14276, such as improving access to fishing opportunities and increasing production.

3. Are there any specific NOAA programs or public data that NEFMC relies on that no longer operate or function in an optimal manner?

Several NOAA programs and data products that the NEFMC depend on have been scaled back, delayed, or operating below optimal capacity. Ongoing data collection that continues long-term time series is essential to stock assessment, and gaps or changes in these data streams make analyses challenging. Such gaps contribute to instability in catch advice and fisheries yield. These data collection and analytical programs require vessel and crew time, infrastructure, and the expertise of analysts, scientists, and support personnel, many of whom have left the NEFSC since February. Additionally, the Council relies on socioeconomic data and analyses to support evaluation of impacts associated with Council actions. The Social Sciences Branch at the NEFSC lost a substantial number of employees in the last year that provided critical information to support Council decisions. The New England groundfish commercial fishery sectors' reliance on real-time information to support catch accounting and quota transfers was impacted when the primary support staff at GARFO was fired during the February cuts to probationary employees. Other examples of impacts include:

- Shortened or canceled survey legs due to maintenance issues and crew shortages, which disrupts stock assessment continuity and forces the use of outdated estimates;
- Uncertain funding for maintenance of the *R/V Bigelow*, the vessel used for the NEFSC spring and fall bottom trawl surveys, which provide critical data for most stocks managed by the NEFMC;
- Delayed publication of the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for the Scallop Research Set-Aside (RSA) program, which supports critically important annual surveys for sea scallops; this program does not include Federal funding, instead it relies on commercial harvest of scallops with a portion of sales set aside to fund the surveys and research, and it is unclear why the NOFO has not published to support the 2026 Scallop RSA program;
- Reductions in the Port Biological Sampling Program and capacity to process samples, which has caused increased uncertainty in age-based stock assessments;
- Reductions in fisheries observer coverage rates due to contractor funding gaps and reduced data review capacity, which undermines accountability and compliance confidence leading to more conservative management measures;
- Reduced capacity in the stock assessment enterprise, including an indefinite pause in research activities to advance and modernize methods and approaches;
- Shortfall in funding to support the NEFSC's Recreational Bioeconomic Model, which has impacted the Council's ability to predict effects of proposed recreational fishing measures on angler satisfaction, fishing effort, and recreational harvest and discards;
- Substantial loss of NEFSC's social scientists and economists, which has resulted in less robust socioeconomic analyses to support Council decisions;
- Marginalization of climate related research and oceanographic modeling, which has impacted the Council's approach to risk tolerance when setting catch advice;
- Reductions in GARFO's Analysis and Program Support Division staff, which has delayed data access for development of Council actions;
- Overarching loss of institutional knowledge and expertise in fisheries science and management, which inhibits the Council's ability to make well-informed decisions.

4. Do you anticipate that the science, policy, and implementation of fisheries management will continue to be influenced by the cuts to NOAA?

The science and management enterprise in New England and nationally will certainly be impacted by the cuts to NOAA. The Council has been operating in a triage mode in 2025 as we gain understanding of the depth of the staff and program cuts. We anticipate that the impact of the cuts will become more evident and harmful as we move forward. As noted above, we are reliant on fishery dependent and independent information and stock assessments to sustainably manage fisheries and anticipate that reduced assessment capacity will continue for the near future. The substantial loss of social scientists and economists has and will continue to affect the Council's ability to provide adequate evaluations of impacts on fishing businesses and communities. Reductions in GARFO's capacity to review Council actions and develop fishery regulations will cause delays in implementation of management measures and lead to lost fishing opportunities. And the overall loss of institutional knowledge in the last year could take a decade or more to replace.

While the impacts that have occurred in the last year have created many challenges, the anticipated future influences of cuts to NOAA staff and funding are likely to be highly damaging to fisheries science and management in New England. The Council is proactively developing approaches to increase management flexibility and supplement scientific products through partnerships with state agencies, academic institutions, and research organizations. Adaptive management approaches to minimize disruptions to fishing operations are required to maintain public engagement and trust in the Council process, and regional NOAA leadership has been assisting the Council to advance new ideas and methods. However, sustained investment in surveys, stock assessment capacity, socioeconomic analyses, and policy development will be essential to restoring predictability and maintaining both economic stability and resource sustainability for New England fisheries.

Thank you again for your letter and continued engagement with the New England Fishery Management Council. Please let me know if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Cate O'Keefe
Executive Director

CC:
Mr. Daniel Salerno, NEFMC
Mr. Michael Pentony, GARFO
Dr. Jon Hare, NEFSC
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