



## New England Fishery Management Council

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

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

## MEETING SUMMARY

### Small-Mesh Multispecies Committee & Advisory Panel

Webinar

November 6, 2025

The Small-Mesh Multispecies Committee & Advisory Panel met on November 6, 2025 by webinar to:

- Receive a presentation on the prototype fishery performance and risk policy factor report.
- Develop recommendations for post-season accountability measures based on the report's findings.
- Formulate recommendations for 2026 management priorities.
- Comment on proposed on-demand alternative fixed gear marking options and detection technologies as they pertain to whiting fishing.
- Discuss emerging issues related to fixed gear deployment in small-mesh fishery exemption areas and identify possible ways to resolve them.
- Discuss other business, as necessary

**MEETING ATTENDANCE:** Committee: Jackie Odell (chair), Peter Whelan, Peter Aarrestad, Scott Olzsewski, Ted Platz, Michael Pierdinock, and Daniel Salerno (Council chair);

Advisors: Katie Almeida, Thomas Testaverde, Bonnie Brady, and Daniel Farnham Jr.;

NEFMC staff: Andrew Applegate (plan lead), Emily Bodell, Mark Grant, Naresh Pradhan, Rachel Feeney, Jonathon Peros, Michelle Bachman, Jennifer Couture, Angelia Miller, and Robin Frede

Public: Sefatia Romeo Theken, Kelly Whitmore

#### **KEY OUTCOMES**

- **New Reporting Workflow:** Staff introduced a newly developed, efficient reporting workflow that transitions from the existing annual monitoring reports. This new process incorporates all previous data, such as comparisons of catch-to-fishery limits, while adding new components to address evolving data needs related to fishery performance and risk policy factors. The Advisors and Committee suggested a few modifications to provide greater detail about fishery performance.

Work will continue on developing fishery performance and risk policy factor data reports, improving process mapping, applying the procedure to other management plans, and adjusting to address data needs as the Council's risk policy procedure develops.

- **Southern Red Hake Accountability:** Although the Southern Red Hake catch exceeded its Annual Catch Limit (ACL) by 18% in 2024, the Plan Development Team (PDT) recommended

against implementing post-season accountability measures. The Committee and Advisors concurred with this recommendation.

- **CAMS Data Correction:** Issues were identified in the CAMS catch accounting system where whiting trips are frequently miscategorized as 'squid' or 'unknown'. The system requires examination and correction to ensure proper fishery group assignment.
- **Red Hake Discard Analysis:** The Committee and Advisors discussed the high discard rates of Southern Red Hake. While the 40% Total Allowable Landings (TAL) trigger and low possession limits were considered, participants concluded that most discards were associated with the squid fishery due to marketing and product handling challenges. It was noted that Northern Red Hake discards were similarly high, despite a 90% TAL trigger and higher possession limits.
- **Small-Mesh Exemption Area Modifications:** The committee discussed potential modifications to small-mesh exemption area boundaries and seasons. The goal is to improve fishery access and performance, with other measures, such as standardizing possession limits for non-target species, also under consideration.
- **Alternative Gear Marking Action Framework:** Committee and Advisory Panel provided feedback on the joint alternative gear-marking framework currently under development.
- **2027-2029 Specifications** will be developed based on a data update expected in 2026, but if management priorities that the Council approves include additional management measures, the Committee, Advisors, and Plan Development Team (PDT) will begin earlier to develop alternatives. It is unclear what a data update will include or how the PDT will develop specification recommendations based on the update.
- **Management priorities:** The Committee and AP offered some recommendations for management priorities, including an evaluation of and possible revision of exemption area boundaries and seasons as well as standardizing the bycatch allowances.

#### ***AGENDA ITEM #1: UPDATED CATCH ESTIMATES FOR FISHING YEAR 2024***

**Presentation:** Catch estimates for the 2024 fishing year, along with comparisons to specifications, have been integrated into a new, transformed fishery performance report. This report presented standard catch tables for the four small-mesh multispecies stocks. It also included graphs illustrating trends in catch utilization and distribution by fishery group, which helped identify potential concerns regarding discards and other issues.

Utilization of Northern Silver Hake declined from 14% of the Annual Catch Limit (ACL) in 2023 to 5% in 2024 for reasons that are not yet clear, though a decrease in whiting prices may have been a major factor. Some of this decline may be attributable to an effort shift to the southern whiting stock, where utilization increased from 8% in 2023 to 16% in 2024.

With the exception of Southern Red Hake, all 2024 catches were below their ACLs. As in previous years, Silver Hake catches were approximately 25% of their limits. About 85% of all Red Hake catches were discarded. Although estimated discards of Northern Red Hake from the lobster fishery were cut in half, this figure remains uncertain due to the low proportion of observed trips in all years. While total Red

Hake discards from the squid fishery group have slightly declined since 2023, this group still accounts for the majority of Southern Red Hake discards.

Preliminary catch estimates for the 2025 fishing year were also presented. Landings are proceeding at a similar monthly pace to 2024, but the total catch estimate for Southern Red Hake has declined somewhat compared to the previous year.

**Discussion:** The Plan Development Team (PDT) noted that the CAMS catch accounting system has issues with assigning catch to the correct fishery group. Currently, many trips that should be assigned to the 'whiting' category are instead being assigned to the 'squid' or 'unknown' categories. The high variability in the catch estimates was noted. Changes in discards could also be due to changes in effort, how trips are declared, availability of whiting and squid, observer coverage (for example, in the lobster fishery) and other factors. Another Committee member asked about seasonality of discards – Council staff noted that this could be addressed in a report update. Mr. Applegate indicated that he will be participating in a CAMS discard estimation workgroup and will bring these concerns to the group.

Although the Southern Red Hake catch exceeded its ACL by 18%, the total was just under the amount recommended by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and approved by the Council for the 2024-2026 specifications. The PDT recommended against implementing post-season accountability measures based on several factors: the variability of discard estimates, the SSC's conclusion that "fishing is currently an unlikely cause of low biomass," a lower mid-season catch estimate for 2025, and the probable ineffectiveness of further reducing possession limits.

Committee members offered some observations for the southern area, noting that there was more activity in the Southern New England groundfish sector in 2024, with a lot of skate bait trip activity. For the recreational fishery, more red hake seem to be available closer to shore. An Advisor reported that there was a large increase in red hake biomass in their fishing area.

## ***AGENDA ITEM #2: FISHERY PERFORMANCE AND RISK POLICY FACTOR SUMMARY REPORT***

**Presentation:** Mr. Applegate reported on the transformation from the traditional annual monitoring report to a prototype fishery performance and risk policy factor data report. These improvements were driven by a reduction in human resources and the need to address new information requirements, as the new process is significantly more efficient. The report maintains its summary of trends in bycatch and economic factors but adds new products to support a beta phase of risk policy analysis. This analysis aims to quantify the risk buffer needed for specifications and includes new summaries for effective area swept estimates, port trends, fish condition, recruitment, and recreational fishing activity. While there were plans to directly integrate survey biomass and recruitment trends from the Center's Stock Efficiency system, this work was delayed by the federal government furlough.

During the presentation, it was noted that prices for small-mesh multispecies have declined significantly since 2022, though the cause remains unknown. While several related trawl-caught species, such as cod and haddock, have also seen a general price decline, it has not been as severe as that for small-mesh multispecies. The number of vessels and trips targeting small-mesh multispecies has also decreased in both management areas. This is partly associated with an effort shift toward squid, which offers better availability and relative price, and is often targeted by the same vessels on different trips. Mr. Applegate also presented experimental products examining the relationship between recruitment and fish condition,

as well as species' responses to rising temperatures, offering additional insight into how these factors may be affecting the distribution and habitat of small-mesh multispecies.

The PDT highlighted an important trend: an increase in trips landing between 10,000 and 15,000 pounds. This appears related to the increased whiting possession limit of 15,000 pounds for vessels using mesh under three inches, which often target other species like squid, herring, and mackerel. While this was an intended outcome, Mr. Applegate reminded the Committee of the Council's intent to prevent the development of a fishery targeting juvenile whiting, similar to what occurred in the early 2000s.

A new port activity summary table was presented showing revenue, effort, and the number of dealers buying small-mesh multispecies. This information was identified by the risk policy working group as a key element for characterizing commercial fishery risk. The data showed that while the value of the fishery in Gloucester and New Bedford has been relatively stable, Point Judith has seen a decline since 2019.

Mr. Applegate concluded by stating that the presentation was a draft report, which will be revised based on received feedback and finalized for the December Council meeting.

**Discussion:** The discard estimates in the port table appeared unusually high. Mr. Applegate stated he would investigate and make necessary corrections. (It was later determined that the estimates included any trip landing at least one pound of small-mesh multispecies, which encompasses nearly all trawl trips targeting a wide range of species). The Advisors recommended adding the number of observed trips for each fishery group plot to help clarify the level of uncertainty in the discard estimates.

Meeting participants suggested that more granular catch and discard data would be useful for identifying the specific conditions that lead to excessive discarding. The Committee also recommended reorganizing the economic plots to allow for an easier comparison between price and trip data.

The Committee and Advisors debated the potential impact of imports on domestic whiting prices, suggesting that imports from Canada could be a contributing factor. Import data were not included in the report because it is difficult to specifically identify whiting species in trade data. Some potential sources were identified, such as the NMFS foreign trade report, and Dr. Pradhan confirmed he would investigate these data sources for inclusion in future fishery performance reports.

### ***AGENDA ITEM #3: ON-DEMAND GEAR OPTIONS AND OTHER FISHING CONFLICT ISSUES***

**Presentation:** Ms. Bodell delivered a presentation on the joint alternative gear marking framework developed by the New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils along with GARFO. Both Councils moved to postpone final action on the framework until more information on ropeless gear and visualization technology, as solicited through a National Marine Fisheries Service Request for Information, is available.

**Discussion:** Some Advisors voiced concerns about the on-demand gear, particularly the potential for interactions with other gear, liability issues for mobile vessels, and the cost of satellite connectivity as well as the gear itself. A Committee member felt it was important to understand what portion of the fleet already has the necessary internet capabilities, and another stated that there may be different technologies that are suitable for various user groups. Other Committee members noted interest in further trials of the gear and flagged liability concerns for the mobile fleet.

Advisors also noted an increase in interactions with fixed gear in the Gulf of Maine, reporting that fixed gear is now being set more frequently in common bottom trawl areas. They mentioned that the industry

had previously established a gentlemen's agreement with fixed-gear fishermen in New Hampshire to share fishing areas seasonally to avoid gear conflict, but those fishermen are reportedly no longer abiding by the agreement.

***AGENDA ITEM #4: MEASURES AND SPECIFICATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION IN 2026 MANAGEMENT ACTION***

**Discussion**

In addition to the recommendations of the staff and PDT to consider changes to exemption area boundaries and seasons while also standardizing bycatch limits, the Advisors recommended examining the southern red hake management limits and whether they were inhibiting landings and contributing to southern red hake discarding. The general consensus was that some alternatives should be developed and analyzed for the next specifications package.

Mr. Applegate touched on the new management efficiency action that would increase the specification cycle from the current duration to five years. He noted that for small-mesh multispecies, this longer time frame is already allowed because the small-mesh multispecies plan specifies that the current specifications continue as a default if the Council does not supersede them with a specifications action.

***AGENDA ITEM #5: OTHER BUSINESS***

No additional business was raised and the meeting adjourned at 3:45 pm.