



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

MEETING SUMMARY
Groundfish Committee Meeting
Wakefield, MA and Webinar
November 18, 2025

The Groundfish Committee met on November 18, 2025, in Wakefield, MA and via webinar to discuss: 1) Framework Adjustment 72 / Specifications and Management Measures, 2) Framework 68 / ABC Control Rules: ABC Control Rules / Risk Policy project, and 3) Other business, as necessary.

MEETING ATTENDANCE:

Groundfish Committee: John Pappalardo (Chair), Terry Alexander (Vice Chair), Peter Christopher (Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO)), Andy Dangelo, Jim Gilmore and Paul Risi (Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council), Melanie Griffin, Jackie Odell, Mike Pierdinock, Geoff Smith, Megan Ware, and Peter Whelan

Council staff: Robin Frede (Groundfish Plan Coordinator), Mark Grant, Dr. Cate O'Keefe (Executive Director), Dr. Jamie Cournane, Angelia Miller (Maris Collaborative), Jonathon Peros, Emily Bodell

Groundfish Advisory Panel (GAP) Chair: Hank Soule

Recreational Advisory Panel (RAP) Chair: Frank Blount

Presenters: Dr. Roger Brothers, Dr. Lisa Kerr, and Dr. Alexandra Schneider (University of Maine)

In addition, approximately 21 other people attended. Among them were: Dan Salerno (Council Chair), Attorneys Mitch MacDonald and Scott Sakowski (NOAA General Counsel); Liz Sullivan, Spencer Talmage, Laura Smith, Heather Nelson, Ryan Silva (GARFO); Greg Ardini, Kristan Blackhart, Paul Nitschke, Glenn Chamberlain (Northeast Fisheries Science Center); Samantha Tolken (Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary); Sefatia Romeo-Theken (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game); Tara Dolan (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries); Corrin Flora (Maine Department of Marine Resources); Libby Etrie and Gareth Lawson (Conservation Law Foundation); Vito Giacalone (Northeast Seafood Coalition); Adam Baske (Knudsen.Earth); and Julia Mason (Environmental Defense Fund).

The meeting began at approximately 9:03 am.

KEY OUTCOMES

- The Groundfish Committee nominated Terry Alexander to be the Vice Chair of the Committee.
- The Groundfish Committee passed 10 motions, making recommendations to the Council regarding FW 72.

- The GF Committee tasked the PDT to produce additional analyses of white hake acceptable biological catches (ABC) and updated rebuilding projections in time for the Council meeting.

AGENDA ITEM #1: RECREATIONAL ADVISORY PANEL (RAP) REPORT AND GROUNDFISH ADVISORY PANEL (GAP) REPORT

RAP Report:

The Chair of the RAP provided an overview of the RAP meeting held on November 17, 2025. The RAP had a quorum and received a presentation on the bioeconomic model and the on-line decision support tool that are used to evaluate potential recreational management measures for Western Gulf of Maine cod and Gulf of Maine haddock. The RAP discussed one item under Framework Adjustment (FW) 72 – Action 3 Recreational Fishery Management Measures. The Chair summarized the rationale provided for the RAP's consensus statement supporting expanding the process to all stocks of cod and haddock (Alternative 2). The Chair provided a brief update on recreational fishing data, noting that only one wave of data was available due to the government shutdown. The estimated number of trips was down from the prior year in the same wave. During the RAP discussion, an error was identified in the preliminary haddock catch statistics that will be corrected.

Discussion on the presentation

One Committee member was surprised by the recreational fishing data update showing the number of trips was down and said that decline had not been seen in New Hampshire waters. The RAP Chair explained that the number of angler trips was consistently down along the coast from Maine to North Carolina and that another wave of data was necessary to evaluate whether effort was truly down.

Another Committee member stated that the timing of MRIP data for Wave 4 is likely to be delayed. That data was due to have been released on October 15th but was not released due to the government shutdown.

GAP Report:

The Chair of the GAP provided an overview of the GAP meeting held on November 17, 2025. The GAP did not have a quorum but provided 10 discussion statements for the Committee regarding FW 72. The GAP did not comment on the recreational action (Action 3) in FW 72 but generally supported all other actions in FW72.

Some members of the GAP supported using a higher risk level to determine ABCs for white hake because: it is not overfished, overfishing is not occurring, the spawning stock biomass (SSB) over time significantly changed in this assessment when compared with the prior assessment, the commercial fishery is not seeing declining catch rates, the lease price is stable, the stock is highly utilized, and white hake is critical to catching other stocks. The GAP also recommended a new Council priority for 2026 to revisit the current white hake rebuilding plan.

Some members of the GAP also supported using a higher risk level to determine ABCs for redfish until the next assessment because the stock is not overfished, overfishing is not occurring, and because the GAP had questions about whether the decline in the current assessment was a natural decline from a high abundance regime.

Discussion on the presentation

A Committee member asked whether the GAP had discussed that redfish young of the year are higher in the water column and unavailable to surveys. The GAP had not discussed that idea, but the GAP Chair

found the topic interesting. That Committee member also asked whether the GAP discussed changing the risk policy for white hake or changing the rebuilding plan for white hake. The GAP did not recommend a specific approach for the Committee to follow but asked the Committee to consider the issue and determine whether any relief could be provided for the fishery, similar to how witch flounder was approached in 2016.

The Committee Chair noted the GAP had discussed seeing a broader composition of sizes and ages of white hake and consistent catch rates, and asked if the GAP Chair could expand on what the fishery is seeing. The fishery has seen large hake in shore, the ratio of large hake to medium hake has increased, and the proportion of smaller hake is also increasing which suggests increased recent recruitment.

AGENDA ITEM #2: FRAMEWORK 72 / SPECIFICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES

Presentation by Council staff:

Council staff gave a detailed presentation of the draft alternatives in FW 72, including the Scientific and Statistical Committee's (SSC) recommendations for overfishing limits (OFL) and ABCs for 12 stocks, and total allowable catches (TAC) for the three US/Canada shared stocks. With the exception of the TACs for shared stocks, the SSC was asked to recommend OFLs and ABCs for 5 years (2026-2030).

Questions/Discussion on the presentation

A Committee member asked whether the white hake projections that used the autocorrelated recruitment work (AR1) progressively declined while the projections using the short-term recruitment assumption eventually increase. There was discussion on this topic at the 2025 Peer Review Panel that noted there seems to be more of a lag with the AR1 projections. Another Committee member stated that the new assessment indicates that the stock is approaching an overfished status and would be overfished in 2026. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) would need to make an official stock status determination and notify the Council. The GAP discussed revisiting the rebuilding plan for white hake and potentially considering revising the ABCs to be based on 75% F_{MSY} rather than the $F_{Rebuild}$ of 70% F_{MSY} . The Committee member representing GARFO stated that white hake is currently in a rebuilding plan and that two considerations are whether the stock is overfished or approaching an overfished condition, and whether inadequate rebuilding progress is being made. He explained that the agency's determination would consider any changes being developed by the Council. If the stock is determined to be making inadequate progress, the notification letter sent to the Council would include recommendations.

A Committee member asked whether the Council would need to develop a rebuilding plan for Cape Cod/Gulf of Maine (CC/GOM) yellowtail flounder. The new assessment showed that the stock is overfished in the terminal year (2024) but is no longer overfished in 2025. However, NMFS needs to make a formal stock status determination. The Committee member representing GARFO stated the agency will look closely at the rebuilding plan requirements and whether it is necessary for the Council to develop a new rebuilding plan for CC/GOM yellowtail flounder.

A Committee member was struck by the number of stocks for which the SSC stated that it was uncomfortable setting 5-year specifications but that it understood the need for 5-year specifications in response to reduced resources. In many cases, the SSC held the ABC of the third year constant for years 4 and 5. The Committee member commented that he did not understand why the SSC took different approaches for different stocks. The SSC discussed this topic but tried to address nuances by stock. For example, Acadian redfish are longer-lived than many species and projections for this stock don't have as much uncertainty given that the projections through 2030 are based mostly on year class sizes which are already being observed in the data and are not sensitive to recruitment in the short term. The Committee member commented that he would like to have some consistency in the approach taken by SSC.

Another Committee member, commenting on redfish and white hake, asked if the SSC's research recommendations included uncertainty, stock movement out of the survey area, and genetics. Questions

on redfish stock structure would have been addressed through a research track assessment, which had been scheduled but is now paused. In absence of a research track, a suggestion is to look at Canadian survey data for the next management track assessment. For white hake, the Peer Review Panel and SSC acknowledged uncertainty on the potential for movement out of the stock area, rather than making specific research recommendations, and focused most of the discussion on recruitment questions.

A member of the Committee had a long list of assessment questions and observed there would not be a presentation to the Council from the NEFSC on these assessments. The Committee member was concerned about setting specifications for 5 years based on assessments with high levels of uncertainty and stated it would be good to have the questions answered before the Council makes final decisions on FW 72 because the SSC's recommended specifications include significant changes.

The Committee Chair advised that the time to ask questions about the assessments is during the assessment process and the peer review process. He suggested that the Council should address this through its process-mapping work to determine where to bring these concerns and questions into the beginning of the assessment process.

A Committee member highlighted that white hake recruitment is an issue, observed that the shrimp survey formerly was a useful source of information, and raised concern that lacking a survey focused on smaller fish is a challenge for improving our understanding of small fish in the population. The bottom longline survey was added to the white hake assessment and fills a hole for larger white hake but does not address smaller fish.

A Committee member observed that the PDT looked at 3-year catch averages when it met to discuss sub-components, rather than looking forward to consider incoming ABCs, and asked whether the PDT needs a directive from the Committee to consider that the fishery may change in the context of future quotas. The purpose of the sub-component analysis is to set aside enough to cover catch outside the groundfish fishery without unnecessarily hampering the groundfish fishery.

Regarding uncertainties identified in the white hake assessment, a Committee member asked what it meant that catch-at-age information is not well characterized and may be related to misidentification of fish. Historically, white hake has been misidentified as other species (i.e., red hake) and, more recently, there has been a lack of age samples.

The Committee member noted that there was discussion at the SSC that the fleet had shrunk while the catch of white hake had remained consistent and commented that should be a red flag for setting quotas. Recent quota declines are related to survey declines, but there is a question as to whether the stock is migrating or if the stock is congregating as it declines. Another Committee member highlighted that the possibility of a stock moving outside the defined stock area has been in many assessments over the years.

The Council Chair asked how the PDT determined that SNE/MA yellowtail flounder catch would decline in future years. Normally, the Groundfish PDT would use the Scallop PDT's projected bycatch and set the sub-ACL at 90 percent of this value, which has been the approach used for this stock, but bycatch projections were not available due to government shutdown. In response, the Scallop and Groundfish PDTs discussed different approaches based on recent catch data and anticipated scallop fishery activity in future years to recommend reducing the scallop fishery's 2025 sub-ACL for SNE/MA yellowtail flounder by 10 percent. The Council Chair added that FW 69 measures for the scallop fishery focused on the triggers for the accountability measures (AM) for the Georges Bank (GB) yellowtail flounder stock.

Public Comment:

Vito Giacalone (Northeast Seafood Coalition) commented that the Council process is becoming an implementing process where issues of major concern are not discussed and acted upon and stated that there is no place to incorporate fishery information when it conflicts with assessment results.

Motion 1 (Odell/Griffin):

Move to recommend the Council select as preferred alternative in *Section 4.1* Action 1 – Status Determination Criteria: *Section 4.1.2* Alternative 2 – Updated Status Determination Criteria for Georges Bank yellowtail flounder.

Motion 1 passed by consensus and without objection.

Discussion on the Motion: None.

Public Comment: None

Motion 2 (Griffin/Whelan):

Move to recommend the Council select as preferred alternative in *Section 4.3* Action 3 – Recreational Fishery Management Measures: *Section 4.3.2* Alternative 2 – Establish regulatory process for Regional Administrator to adjust recreational measures for cod and haddock.

Motion 2 passed by consensus and without objection.

Discussion on the Motion: There was discussion around whether there is a need for flexibility in setting recreational measures for GB haddock which does not have a recreational sub-ACL. This alternative would create flexibility to adjust measures, if necessary, for instance to address the statistical areas that are now part of the Western Gulf of Maine (WGOM) cod stock area which overlap with the GB haddock stock area. This would not preclude Council action to set a recreational sub-ACL in the future. GB haddock does not have a recreational possession limit but does have a recreational minimum size. Without this change, the Regional Administrator could change the minimum recreational size for GOM haddock, but not for GB haddock.

Public Comment: None

Motion 3 (Odell/Alexander):

Move to accept the PDT's recommendations for sub-components (as referenced in Table 8 in the draft Framework 72 discussion document).

Motion 3 passed by consensus and without objection.

Discussion on the Motion: None.

Public Comment: None

Motion 4 (Griffin/Ware):

Move to recommend setting the SNE/MA yellowtail flounder scallop fishery sub-ACL at the FY2025 sub-ACL (2.7 mt). This would be set for FY2026-2030 with plans for the PDT to re-evaluate in 2026 with updated data.

Motion 4 passed by consensus and without objection.

Discussion on the Motion: The amount of catch in the current fishing year was discussed, noting that the full year is not yet complete and catch may continue to increase. Further, it was discussed that setting this sub-component at 100% of the 2025 value would still not restrict the northeast multispecies fishery.

Public Comment: None

Motion 5 (Odell/Alexander):

Recommend to the Council to select as preferred the FY2026 U.S./Canada total allowable catches (TACs) for Eastern GB cod, Eastern GB haddock, and GB yellowtail flounder (referenced in Table 10 in the draft Framework 72 discussion document).

Motion 5 passed by consensus and without objection.

Discussion on the Motion: None.

Public Comment: None

Motion 6 (Ware/Alexander):

Move to set the 2026-2030 ABC for CC/GOM yellowtail Flounder at 1,736mt within FW 72.

Rationale: There are significant questions about the biological plausibility of the assessment results and projections. The 2025 stock assessment finds CC/GOM yellowtail flounder to be overfished, noting that the stock remains below the new SSB_{MSY} proxy even though fishing pressure has been at historically low levels and that recruitment has been generally weak to moderate over the past decade. Despite these results, scaling changes in the model suggest catch could increase 10-fold. Further, the projections suggest biomass will nearly double between 2024 and 2025. Maintaining the ABC at the 2026 value tries to account for the seemingly implausible results while also allowing for significant increase in catches, which have been under 400 mt over the last decade.

Motion 6 carried (6/13).

Discussion on the Motion: The Committee noted there were tough discussions on other stocks ahead, but concerns were expressed about the CC/GOM yellowtail flounder assessment. A parallel was drawn to white hake which in a previous assessment was indicated to be overfished, but just below the threshold of 50% B_{MSY} . Discussion included market loss and fishing behavior changes to avoid cod that have resulted in reduced yellowtail flounder catch.

Council staff noted that the PDT will need to recalculate the OFLs in later years based on the ABC of 1,726 mt.

Public Comment: None

Motion 7 (Griffin/Odell):

Move to recommend the Council select as preferred alternative FY2026 specifications for GB cod, GB haddock, and GB yellowtail flounder, and FY2026-FY2030 specifications for SNE/MA yellowtail flounder, GB winter flounder, GOM winter flounder, SNE/MA winter flounder, ocean pout, and Atlantic Wolffish (all stocks except white hake and redfish), as referenced in Table 12 in the draft Framework 72 discussion document. FY2026-2030 specifications for CC/GOM yellowtail flounder, as modified today.

Motion 7 passed by consensus and without objection.

Discussion on the Motion: The Committee chose to recommend the CC/GOM yellowtail flounder specifications as set in Motion 6.

Public Comment: None

Motion 8 (Odell/Alexander):

For white hake, the GF Committee tasks the PDT to produce the following information in time for the Council meeting:

1. Compile the numerical catches associated with a range of confidence intervals at the $F_{Rebuild}$ of 70% F(MSY). The committee seeks to understand the range of catches around the 70% F_{MSY} for fishing years 2026-2030.
2. Provide OFL/ABC projections associated with F(MSY)75% for FY2026-2030, and provide updated rebuilding projections comparing 70% F(MSY) and 75% F(MSY) under both the long-term (1963-2022) and more-recent recruitment timeframes (1995-2022).

Discussion on the Motion: The Committee has limited opportunities to look at responses to updated stock assessments. The confidence intervals for projections desired were discussed. Assessment reports provide a confidence interval around F_{MSY}. The PDT has not historically provided confidence intervals around projected catch or SSB but instead provides point estimates because it is external to the assessment and there are known uncertainties with the methods for determining estimates at confidence intervals within AgePro (these tend to be unrealistically small). The range of values in this request would be small. The Executive Director explained that using catch recommendations based on confidence intervals around catch estimates would be a new approach outside the process the SSC follows for recommending catch advice and could not be considered in the available timeframe. Discussion included whether this information would better inform votes at the December Council meeting. It was stated that the effects of the white hake quotas on the fishery had not yet been fully evaluated. There is a very short amount of time between this Committee meeting and the Council meeting, and it was discussed that the PDT would not have time to complete both parts of the motion prior to the Council's December meeting.

Motion 9 (Smith/Griffin):

Motion to amend:

For white hake, the GF Committee tasks the PDT to produce the following information in time for the Council meeting:

1. Provide OFL/ABC projections associated with 75%F_{MSY} for FY2026-2030 and provide updated rebuilding projections comparing 70% F_{MSY} and 75% F_{MSY} under both the long-term (1963-2022) and more-recent recruitment timeframes (1995-2022).
2. Include draft specifications based on projections at 75% F_{MSY} for FY2026-2030.

Motion 9 carried (6/4/0).

Rationale: Time constraints and focusing the request on information that will best inform the Council's decision.

Discussion: Time constraints are real, but reducing white hake will affect catch of all other stocks because it is important to all fisheries and white hake is being caught in areas where they previously were not found. Many Committee members conceded the time constraints but supported the intent to have additional information regarding white hake. Because the Council will take final action at its December meeting, specifications based on these OFLs and ABCs would also need to be calculated but would need to be approved by the SSC before they could be included in FW72. This would not be a remand to the SSC, but it would be a request to the SSC to reconsider. A discussion would need to occur around suspending the ABC control rule to alter the rebuilding plan. The Council would effectively need to vote to accept whichever outcome (75%F_{MSY} or 70%F_{MSY}) the SSC approved.

Public Comment:

Vito Giacalone (Northeast Seafood Coalition) stated the thinking behind this request for the SSC to reconsider the OFLs and ABCs is consistent with the rationale for holding the CC/GOM yellowtail flounder quota constant for 5 years. The SSC clearly wanted to consider additional information and options for this stock but was not able to deviate from the control rule without the Council asking for reconsideration based on a change in the Council's risk tolerance for this stock. The Council Chair commented that the additional quota that could come from the additional work would not be enough to address the situation in the immediate future but that there is an ongoing project to revise the Council's Risk Policy that may lead to a long-term solution.

Motion 10:

Main motion as amended:

For white hake, the GF Committee tasks the PDT to produce the following information in time for the Council meeting:

1. Provide OFL/ABC projections associated with F(MSY)75% for FY2026-2030, and provide updated rebuilding projections comparing 70% F(MSY) and 75% F(MSY) under both the long-term (1963-2022) and more-recent recruitment timeframes (1995-2022).

2. Include draft specifications based on projections at 75% F(MSY) for FY2026-2030

Motion 10 passed by consensus and without objection.

Motion 11 (Ware/Griffin):

Move to remove the sector management uncertainty buffer for white hake in FW72 for FY2026-2030 if the ASM target coverage rate is at least 90% or higher.

Motion 11 passed by consensus and without objection.

Rationale: Currently occurring and the fishery has historically high coverage. The fishery is dependent on this stock.

Discussion: There is concern about redfish, and white hake, in years 4 and 5.

Public Comment: None

Motion 12 (Griffin/Smith):

Move to recommend to the Council as preferred alternative FY2026-FY2030 specifications for redfish (referenced in Table 12 in the draft Framework 72 discussion document.)

Motion 12 carried on a show of hands (8/2/0).

Discussion on the Motion: None.

Public Comment: None

AGENDA ITEM #3: FRAMEWORK 68 / ABC CONTROL RULES: ABC CONTROL RULES / RISK POLICY PROJECT

Presentation by Council staff:

Council staff provided background on the development of FW68 since 2023, including meetings of the SSC, Committee, and Council. The action was paused while the Council's revised Risk Policy was developed. In 2025, the focus has been on integration of the revised Risk Policy with the ABC Control Rule work – including simulation and evaluation under Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) initiatives through contract work (Drs. Kerr & Brothers of University of Maine). Contract work is anticipated to be completed in spring 2026. An overview of the FW68 timeline was presented through 2027, the target implementation date for revised ABC Control Rules for groundfish stocks.

Presentation by University of Maine project team:

Dr. Roger Brothers provided an overview of the contract work to date – which includes work on the Risk Policy and ABC Control Rules. Under the Risk Policy work, the project team compiled a demonstration scoring for groundfish stocks. Z-scores were calculated for each groundfish stock to demonstrate risk – low, intermediate, and high. Integration of the Risk Policy with Control Rules could: directly incorporate a wider range of criteria when setting catch advice; allow ABC's that are closer to the OFL and farther from the OFL; and provide objective criteria defining when to move in each direction. An example was

provided of a “dynamic buffer” control rule – sets a buffer between the OFL and ABC based on risk. Another example is a “tiered” control rule – sets a buffer based on a risk tier. The final approach - “combined” approach - “dynamic” with “tier” - fixed at certain high and low levels of risk. The presentation provided demonstration results for the groundfish stocks when applying each of the three approaches. This was compared to the current applications of the ABC Control Rules by groundfish stock. The team also provided an overview of how to integrate risk policy output into ABC Control Rules.

Simulation testing would be through a management strategy evaluation (MSE). Dr. Brothers provided an overview of the plan. An MSE would be used to test the performance of Risk Policy integrated ABC Control Rules. The steps would be:

- Explore the impact of alternative ABC control rules;
- Explore the impact of varied Risk Policy results (3 focal groundfish stocks);
- Explore the impact of alternative factor weightings (e.g., uniform vs. NEFMC mock weighting); and
- Compare results to performance of the current groundfish ABC control rule.

An overview of the MSE and what will be simulated was provided and builds off past work for cod. The three focal stocks are GOM haddock, WGOM cod, and witch flounder. An overview of potential performance metrics was provided and Dr. Brothers requested feedback from the Committee on risk policy integration with ABC Control Rules.

Questions/Discussion on the presentation

A Committee member asked whether there had been any consideration of case study stocks and looking backwards to evaluate how the change in the Control Rules would have worked. The project team had given some thought to that concept but have not proceeded. There will be some exploration of applying risk policy scoring back in time.

Another Committee member asked about tracking stock status across risk tiers over time. At this stage it is hard to know if the model is capturing full “bounciness” over time, and an example was provided of recruitment.

A different Committee member leaned towards the “dynamic” buffer because it is predictable and fairly consistent over time and raised concern with the tiered buffer because a very small change in scoring could lead to change in quota. The team will start with the dynamic, tiered approach which could have steps set more strategically. An example was provided.

Another Committee member also liked exploring the “dynamic” approach more and was concerned by jumps in the tiered approaches, citing white hake as an example. White hake is in a rebuilding plan and has low recruitment, which is reflected in the scoring. The approaches in the model tend to go further than the current ABC control rules. For example, lowering white hake to 50%F_{MSY}.

A different Committee member was least interested in the tiered approach because of concerns that the levels run counter to goals of stability, by was more interested in a dynamic approach with tiers, similar to an escalator.

AGENDA ITEM #4: OTHER BUSINESS

2026 Council Priorities

Council staff provided an overview of the Executive Committee's proposed priorities for groundfish for 2026. Staff noted one potential additional priority for consideration: modification of default specifications and possible rollover provisions, as raised during development of the Omnibus Management Flexibility Action.

One Committee member expressed interest in discussing the Amendment 23 review at the Council meeting. Another Committee member also suggested discussing possible suspension of the redfish exemption. Council staff clarified that any changes to the redfish exemption could be considered as part of any Council action in response to the review of the exemption.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 3:20 pm.