



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: January 14, 2025
TO: Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC)
FROM: Cate O'Keefe, Executive Director
SUBJECT: **Terms of Reference – White hake overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) for fishing years (FY) 2026 to 2030**

TERMS OF REFERENCE

- A. Consider the results of the most recent stock assessment for white hake and information provided by the Council's Groundfish Development Team (PDT). Reconsider prior SSC recommendations for FY 2026-2030 OFL and ABC for white hake based on 75% F_{MSY} , considering the Council's groundfish ABC control rule, Risk Policy, and white hake rebuilding plan.

Prior SSC recommendation for FY 2026-2030

The SSC met on October 21-22, 2025, to recommend OFLs and ABCs for white hake and several other groundfish stocks. The SSC recommended white hake OFL and ABC for FY 2026-2030 based on 70% F_{MSY} , which is consistent with the white hake rebuilding plan (Option B of the ABC control rule).

In December 2026, during final action on Framework Adjustment (FW) 72 to the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan, the Council passed the following motion:

that the Council: 1) Preliminarily, approve white hake OFLs/ABCs for FY 2026-2030 as recommended by the SSC, and 2) Request the SSC consider FY 2026-2030 ABCs for white hake based on 75% F_{MSY} , taking into consideration the Council's Risk Policy and rebuilding plan. The Council accepts any revised SSC recommendations without discussion for adoption in Framework 72.

After the October SSC meeting, the Groundfish Committee tasked the PDT to provide projections at 75% F_{MSY} for comparison and consideration by the Council in December. This additional information will be provided to the SSC for the meeting on January 21.

White hake assessment and status

White hake was assessed in 2025 via a Level 3 management track assessment, which updated commercial fishery catch data and research survey indices of biomass, added two additional survey indices, and updated the ASAP assessment model and biological reference points through 2024 (Document #3 links). Additionally, stock projections were updated through 2030. Based on

this assessment, white hake is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring, consistent with the results of the prior assessment in 2022.

White hake rebuilding plan

White hake has been in a rebuilding plan since 2004 with a rebuilding deadline of 2031 and F_{rebuild} defined as 70% F_{MSY} . However, the rebuilding plan was modified for FY 2024-2025 via [FW66](#). Full details of the modified rebuilding plan are included in Section 5.8.1. of FW66, and rationale is included in the Groundfish PDT memo (Document #2). In summary,

- In 2022, the SSC recommended white hake OFL and ABC for FY 2023-2025 based on the F_{rebuild} of 70% F_{MSY} . The Council adopted an ABC for FY 2023 only via FW65 to allow for potential future modification to the rebuilding plan. The Council also requested a management track assessment to be conducted in 2023, but that was not completed.
- Rather, two independent analyses were contracted by the Council in 2023 to consider recruitment assumptions in stock projections. Results from both projects were reviewed by the SSC on August 10, 2023 (Documents #6a).
- On September 8, 2023, the SSC met to consider a request from the Council to: 1) evaluate a rebuilding plan modification that uses 75% F_{MSY} for FY 2024-2025, weighing the risks to rebuilding progress along with possible social and economic impacts in the multispecies fishery, and 2) if warranted, propose revised FY 2024-2025 OFL and ABC for white hake. The SSC recommended OFL and ABC for FY 2024-2025 based on 75% F_{MSY} , and the Council then adopted revised the OFL and ABC via FW66.

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.

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 (Document #4) has been revised to align with the factors in the Risk Policy Concept. The SSC can use the revised matrix in a similar manner to previous Risk Policy information.

INFORMATION

1. Presentation by Council staff
2. Groundfish PDT memo to the SSC, January 14, 2026
3. September 2025 Management Track Assessment
 - a. 2025 Management Track Assessment Peer Review Report, [October 4, 2025](#)
 - b. Stock Assessment Support Information [portal](#)*
4. Risk Policy Matrix for white hake
5. *Framework Adjustment* 69, Affected Environment Human Communities (Section 5.7), [March 11, 2025](#)
6. Previous SSC recommendations
 - a. Recruitment assumptions
 - i. Meeting materials: [August 10, 2023](#)
 - ii. SSC report: [August 31, 2023](#)
 - b. FY 2024-2025 OFLs and ABCs
 - i. Meeting materials (original meeting): [September 8, 2023](#)
 - ii. SSC report: [September 15, 2023](#)
 - iii. Meeting materials (addressing data correction): [October 27, 2023](#)
 - iv. SSC report: [November 13, 2023](#)
 - c. FY 2026-2030 OFLs and ABCs
 - i. Meeting materials: [October 21-22, 2025](#)
 - ii. SSC report: [November 12, 2025](#)
7. 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.