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

MEETING SUMMARY

Joint Groundfish Committee and Groundfish Advisory Panel Meeting

Webinar

March 31, 2026

The Groundfish Committee (Committee) and Groundfish Advisory Panel (GAP) met jointly on March 31, 2026, via webinar to discuss: 1) Redfish Sector Exemption Review, and 2) 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.

Groundfish Advisory Panel: Hank Soule (Chair), Cassie Canastra Larsen (Vice Chair), Rick Bellavance, Bonnie Brady, Jerry Leeman, Joe Letourneau, and Ben Martens.

Council staff: Robin Frede (Groundfish Plan Coordinator), Mark Grant, Angelia Miller (Maris Collaborative), Cate O'Keefe (Executive Director)

Council Chair: Dan Salerno

In addition, about 22 other people attended. Among them were:

Attorneys Mitch MacDonald and Scott Sakowski (NOAA General Counsel); Liz Sullivan, Spencer Talmage, Laura Smith, Heather Nelson (GARFO); Glenn Chamberlain and Greg Ardini (Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC)); Sefatia Romeo-Theken (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game); Renee Zobel (New Hampshire Fish and Game); Robyn Linner and Corrin Flora (Maine Department of Marine Resources); Libby Etrie, Hannah MacDonald, Vito Giacalone, Knoep Nieuwkerk, Lucinda Nieuwkerk, Eben Nieuwkerk, Hugh Bowen, Brian Pearce, Dave Leveille, and George Oliveira.

The meeting began at approximately 9:00 am.

KEY OUTCOMES

- The GAP and Committee provided feedback on the PDT's draft report on the Redfish Sector Exemption Review.
- The Committee passed two motions and one request to the NESFC regarding input for upcoming stock assessments.

OPENING REMARKS

The Groundfish Committee Chair welcomed the new groundfish advisors. All groundfish advisors and Committee members introduced themselves. Council staff provided a presentation of the Council's advisory panel policies. Council Chair Salerno indicated he planned to participate in the meeting today as a committee member.

AGENDA ITEM #1: REDFISH SECTOR EXEMPTION REVIEW

Presentation by Council staff:

Council staff provided an overview of the PDT's draft report on the review of the redfish sector exemption. The presentation included an overview of the review's objectives to evaluate performance of the universal redfish sector exemption established in Framework 61, including metrics on catch composition, fishery performance, and program goals and objectives, background information on the redfish sector exemption, summary of the PDT's review analyses, and main conclusions. Staff emphasized the intent for today's meeting as an opportunity to ask questions about the report and discuss the findings. This could include sharing initial ideas on potential modifications to consider in response to the review, but no decisions were needed today on whether to consider potential changes to the redfish exemption, as that would occur during priorities discussions in the fall.

Questions and comments on the presentation:

The GAP Chair noted the GAP has members with extensive experience with the redfish sector exemption program: Vice Chair Larsen runs a fleet with participating vessels and is a dealer, Jerry Leeman is a participant, and GAP Chair Soule and Dave Leveille (in the audience) are sector managers with members that have participated.

The GAP Chair asked for clarification on the temporal uncertainty with identifying redfish exemption trips. Given there is a time stamp with the Trip Start Hail (TSH) and Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) catch report when vessels switch to the smaller mesh, and the operator must start new a Vessel Trip Report (VTR) with a change in mesh size, he thought this would seem to provide flags for trip start, transition to redfish exemption, and trip end, along with haul numbers. Council staff and GARFO staff clarified there is greater limitation on the VTR component: notifications have time stamps, but VTRs do not and this creates challenges for matching sub-trips (defined as any change of gear, mesh, or statistical area). If a vessel fishes with a smaller mesh size after submitting the VMS catch report, and then in a later sub-trip returns to fishing a larger mesh, that is not picked up. Advisors were surprised to learn this can happen, and staff explained that after notifying use of the redfish exemption, a vessel may use the smaller 5.5-inch mesh but is not required to; the regulations allow for vessels to fish codend mesh larger than 5.5-inch mesh under the exemption, they must remain in the exemption area. Advisors asked how often this occurs. Staff said they would need to look into this to confirm.[1]

The GAP Chair asked to confirm that compliance for the discard threshold is monitored by observed discards only, meaning only observed hauls (not just observed trips), and GARFO staff confirmed this is correct.

[1] The vast majority of redfish exemption sub-trips report using 5.5-inch mesh. Approximately 10% of exemption sub-trips report using mesh size of 6-inch or 6.5-inch.

On the fleet participation metrics, the GAP Chair asked to clarify that "Days Fished per Trip" comes from the VTR and is calculated as the number of hauls multiplied by the duration of hauls, which GARFO staff confirmed. The GAP Chair noted this is dramatically different than how they traditionally look at this metric of fishing effort and given that some vessels fish daytime only which affects the calculation.

On redfish landings proportions, the GAP Chair noted this is why during FW61 development there was consideration for two different landings thresholds, reflecting that during certain times of year it's harder to catch high concentrations of redfish. He thought this could be something the Council may be interested in revising in the future. On the observer length frequency analysis and inclusion of a range of mesh sizes to account for potential inaccuracies, he remarked that these can be attributed to observers using calipers to measure codend mesh size while the U.S. Coast Guard uses a digital tool.

The GAP Chair agreed the exemption reporting could use some revamping but noted that sector managers can easily ID redfish exemption trips and could do so if necessary. The Council Chair referred to the meeting of the PDT sub-group and sector managers, where some managers had a difference in opinion on what is considered a redfish exemption trip vs what the PDT used, and asked if the information presented today was the same. Staff clarified that there was a slight difference based on a CAMS database refresh but that the PDT did not change the redfish exemption trip criteria used. Rather, there had been confusion about the trip criteria, which is why the PDT included a detailed description of the criteria NMFS uses to identify exemption trips. Sector managers had asked for a list of the trips used in the analysis, which GARFO had not yet shared. GARFO staff also noted that since December 2024 they have been sending monthly reports to managers with a list of redfish trips.

The GAP Chair asked if there has been enforcement action with respect to the Trip Start Hail (TSH) requirement. Council staff explained OLE did observe some non-compliance and worked with the vessels on education, but no enforcement action was taken. The question was raised as to whether the TSH is the correct tool for monitoring use of the exemption. GARFO staff confirmed that no action was taken by GARFO and were not aware that any sector managers had submitted trip issues. The GAP Chair asked if any sectors submitted non-compliance reports with respect to compliance with catch thresholds. GARFO staff were not aware any sectors had submitted non-compliance reports or taken enforcement action regarding compliance with the catch thresholds. The GAP Chair asked if the PDT reviewed sector annual reports for any information on sector enforcement of redfish exemption requirements. Sector managers are tasked with co-management, and the Chair felt it reasonable for the Council to expect sectors to act as needed, and suggested these annual reports should include information on sector enforcement action of redfish exemption program requirements. Staff explained that the PDT discussed examining sector annual reports as part of this review but noted they are not standardized; however, staff could consider this going forward. There are also broader conversations about Council utilization of sector annual reports.

An advisor asked for clarification on the observer length frequency analysis to confirm this is showing little difference between mesh sizes for discards or landed catch. Staff clarified they are not seeing evidence of differences between mesh sizes for length frequencies of fish, both for discards and landed catch. The curves in the length frequency proportion figures line up showing the use of small mesh is not affecting fish size selection. The data examined in this analysis is not specific to the redfish exemption trips, as the question is on whether there is any sign of a shift in selectivity (presumedly to smaller fish) with the use of the smaller 5.5-inch mesh allowed under the exemption.

The GAP Chair noted historical dealer data exists for grading redfish by size on some redfish exemption trips and that he has seen different size fish retained based on the mesh size. Another advisor shared their experience as a dealer, where they use a grading machine to separate out the smaller fish for bait. She noted there was more of a small run this year, but also that her vessels participated less in the redfish program this year to focus on pollock instead. Staff noted that in 2024 there are consistently higher discards for redfish and pollock, across true redfish trips and other trips with the TSH that were not

redfish trips. The PDT discussed that this likely reflects a year class recruiting. Looking at the assessments, there is a 2020 recruitment event for pollock that would explain this pulse in discards, with the pattern less clear for redfish. Redfish has higher probability of discarding legal-sized fish, while it's very low for haddock and pollock.

An advisor stated from his experience that redfish are almost always only caught in the daytime and fishing at night results in higher pollock catch. These species rarely overlap, as one goes up in the water column while the other goes down. He wondered about the length frequency in observer data between nighttime and daytime. The advisor was also interested if an increase in new operators has led to a recent change in discards, as he believes discard rates are related to participant experience. Staff clarified they did not look at tenure of operators in terms of performance, but suggested this could be explored in the future, particularly if sectors were not meeting catch thresholds. Staff also noted the PDT didn't have a specific conclusion around the landings threshold. Generally, median operator-level redfish landings are over the 55% threshold and in some years are higher. A higher threshold could be considered, though there are no clear break points and there is considerable variability by operator.

One advisor speculated that the length frequency findings could be related to redfish being a daytime fishery. Newer, less experienced operators are nervous and double their tow durations, which could lead to more discards. If operators are towing at night with a larger mesh, higher weight catch closes the mesh. He referenced that DFO Canada looked at mesh size vs tow length frequency and suggested this as an additional area for analysis.

Staff later clarified following the meeting that the observer length frequency analysis examined for signs of a shift in *size* selectivity of fish with mesh size, and not a shift in selectivity in terms of redfish targeting. A comprehensive research effort, the REDNET study, conducted an evaluation of mesh size efficiency and selectivity for redfish targeting.

Staff noted the stock assessment information indicates 50% maturity (not necessarily spawning) for redfish is 5.7 years, with 50% mature at 21.5 cm (~8.5 inches) based on the 2025 stock assessment. Meaning some portion of discards are mature fish. Advisors noted the redfish minimum fish size used to be 9 inches, then dropped to 7 inches about a decade ago.

An advisor asked about discard rates by size by fleet and if there are any redfish caught under 4 inches. He wondered how often the survey encounters fish less than 4 inches in the footprint of the exemption area. Given the NMFS website says smaller fish are up in the water column, these fish shouldn't be caught in otter trawl. Staff noted the observer data has peaks of discarded redfish at 8 inches, some fish at 6 inches, and none under 4 inches.

The advisor asked if pollock catches are occurring at dawn and dusk. He emphasized the importance of considering the species' time schedule, as redfish are active during the day and pollock at night. He commented that if vessels are fishing large mesh at night under the redfish exemption, they may be using a flounder net with the 5.5-inch mesh. Staff explained the PDT did not look at catch composition information by day vs night, and this is good suggestion for analysis that could be conducted should the Council consider future modifications to the exemption. For example, this analysis could help address the interest for greater flexibility in allowing vessels to leave the exemption area without ending the trip, the basis being to get out of the exemption area if vessels are not encountering high catches of redfish and instead catching other groundfish stocks.

A committee member asked if there are any seasonal aspects to the pollock catch, to better understand if the lower redfish landings proportions in Trimester 2 are due to redfish seasonality or influenced by pollock catch, and similarly for other groundfish catch overall. Staff replied that the PDT did not look at pollock catch seasonality but could follow up.

The committee member said they did not see anything in FW61 prohibiting participation by vessels on the Vessel of Concern (VOC) list and asked if any sector operations plans prevent that. Staff replied that GARFO doesn't restrict vessels based on being on the VOC list and were not aware this is in any sector operations plan. The committee member suggested that as a possible improvement to the program.

Several committee members said they expected to see a different selectivity by mesh size. Staff noted the importance in understanding the evolution of the mesh size permitted. Initially, EFPs allowed 4.5-inch mesh codends because that is more optimal for redfish, but there were concerns about bycatch. Minimum mesh size for codends bounced around to 6 inches and now 5.5 inches. The PDT didn't see any evidence in FW61 or now for a substantive selectivity difference between 5.5-inch and 6-inch mesh for redfish. Slight changes in peak of length over time were noted, but these might reflect selective targeting. Other committee members were not surprised the analyses showed no changes in fish length selectivity between the different mesh sizes as redfish are spiky and tend to clog up the net. They commented that a lot of concern has been expressed about haddock and pollock catch in redfish program but suspect this is not a large proportion of total sector catch of those stocks.

A committee member asked about the cumulative probability analysis used to estimate discards over the legal size limit and given that sectors are not supposed to discard legal-size fish, does this raise concerns. Staff explained that this is showing a large proportion of fish discarded over the legal minimum size for redfish, with possible explanations from high volume fishing, including LUMF (legal unmarketable fish). This pattern did not differ from what was seen in the FW61 analysis on the earlier annual exemption years.

A committee member who participated in the REDNET study emphasized the importance of tow times for selectivity of the mesh size with respect to targeting redfish. He noted how redfish exemption fishing started that with 4.5-inch mesh but that was found it to be a little too small and it has since morphed to 5.5-inch or larger. He can't catch redfish at marketable levels in 6.5-inch mesh. He also opined that the fishery requirement for 6.5-inch minimum mesh size is the result of a lawsuit, rather than being based on a change in fish selectivity.

A committee member commented that landings of redfish in the exemption program vary greatly by year and wondered if that could be attributed to market effects such as ex-vessel prices, USDA purchase programs, or strong years for pollock or haddock that could be driving patterns.

Another committee member asked why the length frequency analysis uses the chosen mesh size ranges to define medium and large mesh, as this differs from the SIMM sector guide, and wondered if this would impact results. Staff explained that in part these ranges were chosen to be consistent with what was use in the FW61 analysis to allow comparisons to past findings and can provide more explanation and rationale in the report. GARFO staff added that CAMS only uses small and large mesh categories based on NEFSC analyses which had found the medium mesh did not distinguish much for discards. The committee member also asked why fish length was converted from centimeters to inches in the figures, noting that usually this is not a big deal, but redfish are slow growing and perhaps this could make a difference. He also noted that fishermen refer to total length, but observers use fork length for some species resulting in different measurements, and asked if this could be adjusted in the analysis. Staff explained the PDT chose inches with the idea this would be easier for industry to interpret, but could provide in values in centimeters as a supplement, and would follow up on the total length to fork length question.

A committee member asked to clarify the information provided on enforcement boardings, and staff clarified that the summary of enforcement information references one specific operation targeting the exemption when it was first implemented, but that does not mean there were no other boardings of vessels using the exemption. The committee member would like to know how many redfish trips have been boarded.

The committee member asked about size at maturity information for redfish and pollock. Staff explained they can include the A50 (age when 50% of population reaches maturity) and L50 (length when 50% of population reaches maturity) from the most recent redfish and pollock assessments. This information is provided in the presentation on the length frequency analysis slides and will be added to the report. An advisor commented on uncertainty with the pollock stock assessment as an important consideration. The assessment model assumes there are larger pollock, but that they are not seen and caught (i.e., dome-shaped selectivity assumption and "cryptic biomass"). He commented we are relying on best available data for pollock, and best available is still not a lot of science on large pollock. Staff noted this year there will be a data update for pollock and not a full assessment.

Public comment:

Lucinda Nieuwkirk (F/V Hannah Jo) commented that this is the region's first multi-mesh fishery where vessels can switch mesh sizes mid-trip. She asked when does the observer measure mesh size, as in her experience they only measure at the end of the trip. She stated the regulations say that when a vessel switches from Part A to Part B (the non-redfish exemption portion to the redfish-exemption sub-trip), they should remove the 6-inch cod end and sew on the 5.5-inch cod end. She asked if that happens or if it recorded by the observer. She also asked if observer or enforcement representatives measures the mesh size in the extension of the net. That should be 6 inches on all trips and trawl types. The Committee Chair noted that the Enforcement Committee will meet on May 14th with this topic on the agenda and encouraged enforcement questions to be brought forward at that meeting to enforcement representatives.

Knoep Nieuwkerk (F/V Hannah Jo) commented that the redfish sector exemption began before the time period included in the draft report. Pollock distribution back then was 1/3 small, 1/3 medium, and 1/3 large, but now it's all smalls and mediums, which is based on data provided by NOAA. The overall size of the pollock has gotten smaller. He emphasized that every fish should be managed to be harvested after it survives a spawning cycle. He commented that enforcement is a concern. In his experience, he has found it to be common practice that the USCG boards a vessel approximately once every six months. But the practice seems to have moved away from enforcement of fishing regulations. There has only been one boarding in 14 years related to the redfish exemption[2] which tells him there is a green light for cheating. Enforcement of this program is impossible, not just challenging. He has called NOAA OLE and was told that it costs too much fuel and money to enforce this program. In response to an advisor's concern on day fishing vs night fishing influence on catch composition, he stated he wasn't sure of this, but that he hasn't seen anything other than that smaller mesh catches smaller fish. When he was allowed to fish 5.5-inch gillnets, he caught a lot of juvenile fish. He stated that everyone is fishing 5.5-inch mesh all the time. He also commented that there is an important difference between fish that have just reached maturity, and those that have had an opportunity to spawn successfully, with that size being larger and fish being older than the size and age at maturity.

Staff referred to references in the draft report on previous analyses conducted pertaining to the earlier years of the annual sector exemption. Staff noted that there does appear to be a slight decrease in proportion of large pollock in recent years across both mesh sizes. Additional years of data will be needed to further evaluate that trend.

Eben Nieuwkerk commented that he is a small boat fisherman who started out gillnetting but was forced into dragging as pollock catches declined for small vessels and increased for large vessels. He stated the MSA requires equal catch by different vessels sizes. Side by side fishing of a trawl vessel and gillnet vessel of the same mesh is not equal. Small fish have lower values as well as having less chance to

[2] There has only been one targeted operation related to compliance of redfish exemption regulations.

contribute towards reproduction. He doesn't want the exemption program ended but wants to see it adjusted to have an equal share of the fish to all boat sizes.

Groundfish advisors and committee members provided the following feedback for the draft report on the review:

- On fleet participation/effort – suggest providing metrics in days absent in addition to days fished.
- On use of mesh >5.5-inch on exemption trips – suggest looking at observer data to examine catch composition by time of day.
- Clarify that the catch thresholds are only evaluated for exemption trips and only the portion of the trip using exemption (sub-trips) for a given sector.
- On observer length frequency analysis – suggest rerunning the analysis in centimeters (vs. inches) and to adjust between total length and fork length, given total length is required by regulations while observers measure fork length.
- On landings and revenue – suggest additional context on redfish prices, USDA purchase programs, and other market factors.

Several committee members said they would like to see an updated version of the report based on today's input at the Council meeting before they could vote to accept the report. They appreciated all the input today but felt they needed time to reflect and then could discuss further. The Council Chair and Council staff set expectations for what could be updated, given the Council binder deadline this week and being only two weeks until the Council meeting. Staff and the PDT would focus on modifications to existing analyses and presentation of information to improve clarity. Staff reminded committee members the scope of the review was developed last year with input from the advisors and committee, and to consider the balance between analyses conducted for this year's priority of completing the review, versus possible new priorities for next year to modify the redfish exemption which could include further investigation of particular topics. Adding new analyses to the review at this stage would change the timeline. Executive Director O'Keefe confirmed the 2026 priority is to conduct and complete the review. If there is a desire to expand the scope of the review, the Council could decide to prioritize changes in the scope of the review for next year, with a rationale for the expansion. Executive Director O'Keefe also confirmed the process and timeline for next steps, by which the Committee and Council are receiving the report on the review now and could consider whether to propose modifications to the exemption program during priorities setting in the fall as a priority for 2027 or beyond. The Council will not be taking up outcomes of the report for action this year.

Advisors and committee members were concerned about process and next steps, if this report is the only information to inform changes, as they felt other data and analyses would be necessary to inform any changes and would need time to consider the information in the review report and to understand how additional work or analysis could be brought to the table. The Committee Chair clarified the report is intended to inform a Council decision during December priorities setting on whether to prioritize modifications to the exemption program in 2027, but this would not be the only information that could be considered in discussing changes. The Enforcement Committee is meeting in May to discuss concerns raised by the public on mesh size regulations. The Committee Chair pointed out the other 2026 priorities on the Groundfish Quarterly Outlook and that the PDT will have to move on to work on these other priorities. Staff also emphasized the intent to allow the GAP and Committee time to consider the information and not feel pressured to react to the report now. This was intended to spur discussion as to whether or not modifications to the exemption program should be considered, and to take it up again in the fall when discussing priorities. No decision is necessary today, or in the fall.

AGENDA ITEM #2: MANAGEMENT UPDATES

GARFO staff provided a management update on the following:

Framework 69

- Final rule published on March 8th.

Amendment 25

- Comment period for the Notice of Intent closed March 16th.
- Decision date for the amendment is April 13th.
- Proposed rule comment period ends on April 17th.
- May 1st implementation is unlikely, and GARFO anticipates default specifications for the two cod stocks (GOM and GB) will be made based on the cod allocations in the FY2025 emergency action.

Framework 72

- In review and will not be implemented by May 1st.

2026 Fishing Year specifications

- Because both A25 and FW72 will not be in place May 1st, there will be default specifications for many groundfish stocks.
- The sector rule for 2026 allocations is expected to go direct to a final rule by May 1st.

FY2024 overages and accountability measures

- Due to overages in FY2024, AMs need to be implemented in 2026 for southern windowpane flounder and ocean pout.
- For southern windowpane flounder, the large AM area would be implemented for all groundfish trawl vessels, and non-groundfish trawl vessels fishing codends of 5.5 inches or larger. The AM areas require selective trawl gear. GARFO may be able to reduce the duration of area after September 1, based on a provision of the AM.
- For ocean pout, the small AM area would be implemented for groundfish trawl vessels. The ocean pout AM does not have a provision to reduce the duration.

Questions/Discussion:

A committee member asked whether GARFO has discussed with sector managers the logistics of starting the fishing year with two cod stocks and transitioning to four stocks mid-year, recognizing the administrative challenges this will cause for managers. Mr. Christopher replied that GARFO staff have discussed this with sector managers over two sector manager calls. Managers and GARFO staff agree it is a challenge but think they can handle it if this is not too prolonged. Sector managers use planning displays in SIMM (the Sector Information Management Module), and GARFO will provide these based on both the two and four cod stocks, as well as for default allocations and the full suite of FW72 allocations. GARFO is also developing programming solutions in SIMM that will be helpful to track sector ACE transfers. He is confident the mid-year transition from two to four cod stocks can be done but recognized it gets more challenging the further into the year this goes.

AGENDA ITEM #3: OTHER BUSINESS

A Committee member had two motions and a request to the NEFSC, all related to upcoming stock assessments. Staff reminded Committee members and advisors of the open comment period for community input for the 2027 management track assessments, which includes the four Atlantic cod stocks and several Mid-Atlantic stocks. Staff also noted the NEFSC assessment plan for the June 2026 management track assessments including GB haddock.

1. **MOTION: ODELL/PAPPALARDO**

Related to the Georges Bank haddock 2026 Management Track assessment, the Groundfish Committee recommends the Council request the NEFSC and the June 2026 Management Track Peer Review Panel specifically consider "review panel comments or SSC concerns from the most recent prior management track assessment" under Management Track Assessment TOR #6 ("Respond to any review panel comments or SSC concerns from the most recent prior research or management track assessment").

These comments/concerns include the following:

- Decoupling recruits from ages 2+ to generate separate model estimates of yearly correlation for both recruits and age 2+
- Removing the bias correction (lognormal adjustment), which implied using the median instead of the mean recruits in the reference point calculation
- Exploring model-based index approaches that include a diel variable (day vs. night) in the model to account for potential catchability effects and seeing if there is improvement in the model diagnostics once new years are added to the assessment
- Continue the comparative analysis of the 2-year averaging of weight-at-age (WAA) and the Gaussian Markov Randon Field (GMRF) model approaches to determine if the GMRF approach may not work well when there is a transition from decreasing WAA to increasing or vice versa.

Rationale / Additional Recommendations:

Management Track TOR #6 specifies that previous review panel comments or SSC concerns should be explicitly addressed in updated management track assessments. *The identified review panel comments and SSC concerns should be addressed both quantitively in the assessment bridge runs and qualitatively in the assessment report.* The 2024 Peer Review Panel noted that the combined changes of decoupling recruits and not using the lognormal adjustment produced the best fitting model but increased the retrospective pattern. They noted that the missing survey and age composition data in the terminal year of the assessment was believed to be a large contributor to the increased retrospective. The SSC commented that the impact of turning off the log-normal bias adjustment in the 2024 assessment on the scale of SSB and MSY estimates was significant. These changes had a major change in the historical scale of the biomass reference point (2022 SSBMSY=120,000 mt; 2024 SSBMSY= 24,000 mt.)

Discussion on the motion: A committee member agreed with the motion but commented that it seemed odd to only make this statement for one stock assessment and one TOR and wondered if this is setting a precedent. The maker of the motion explained the rationale for making this recommendation for GB haddock specifically because the NEFSC had shared a summary plan for the June 2026 assessment which did not include these important issues. Another committee member agreed and said they would like to hear from the NEFSC about what these assessment plans are intending to communicate as a new product.

The Council Chair reminded committee members of the Council's previous letter to the NEFSC regarding assessment concerns. He supported the motion and commented that the Council may need to consider more forceful approaches regarding communicating assessment concerns.

MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY WITH ONE ABSTENTION (GARFO).

2. **MOTION: ODELL/PAPPALARDO**

In response to the request for public input for the 2027 assessments, the Groundfish Committee recommends the Council request the NEFSC and 2027 Management Track Peer Review Panel address the specific comments/concerns raised during the Atlantic cod 2024 Management Track assessments (all four stocks) under Management Track Assessment TOR #6 ("Respond to any review panel comments or SSC concerns from the most recent prior research or management track assessment").

These comments/concerns include the following:

- Peer Review Panel comments about WHAM model formulations, Plan B backup approaches, and projections derived from the models
- Peer Review Panel concerns with estimates of scale coming out of the models (e.g., three of the four cod stock catches were close to the total SSB in recent years)
- Peer Review Panel requests for estimates of swept area biomass from the NEFSC survey and exploitable biomass for comparison of scale with model outputs
- Peer Review Panel recommendation for results to be shown in numeric tables to visualize differences in past vs. updated model results

Rationale / Additional Recommendations:

Management Track TOR #6 specifies that previous review panel comments or SSC concerns should be explicitly addressed in updated management track assessments. *The identified review panel comments and SSC concerns should be addressed both quantitively in the assessment bridge runs and qualitatively in the assessment report. Any consideration of removal of the bias correction (lognormal adjustment), which implied using the median instead of the mean recruits in the reference point calculation, or other WHAM parameters not considered by the Research Track should be made available and results on SSB and MSY should be presented in numerical tables.*

MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY WITH ONE ABSTENTION (GARFO).

Committee Request 1:

The Groundfish Committee requests an update from the Science Center to the Council on Portside Biological Sampling. It was noted during the virtual meeting for the Atlantic cod community outreach meeting on March 18th that there continues to be no age-based samples for US Georges Bank cod. With up to 100% monitoring in the commercial groundfish sector fishery for multiple years and a pilot program initiated between the fishing industry and MA DMF, there should be an action plan for acquiring samples from vessels fishing in multiple broad stock areas. The Georges Bank cod assessment approach, which assumes a single, combined commercial fleet (US and Canada) and relies

on Canadian catch-at-age information is inherently mis-specified. This approach ignores selectivity parameter issues from established regulation differences between the US and Canada (e.g., mesh-size regulations, seasonality of fishing effort, and spatial transferability of quota allocation).

Discussion: The committee member who brought forward this request explained she was surprised to hear at the recent community input meeting the assessment scientist share that there are no age samples for GB cod, given the updates the Council has heard on plans to change biological port sampling to collect samples of cod from vessels fishing in multiple broad stock areas. This issue has gone on for years and is critical given the understanding that the assessment models cannot be run without age samples. She noted the MA DMF biological port sampling pilot study focused on finding industry participants and developing protocols at sea and was unsure if there had been collected samples sent to the NEFSC for ageing. Another committee member agreed with the request, adding there has been good cooperative development of this pilot port sampling protocol but she would like a more specific update on timing of these efforts regarding when these age samples will be used in upcoming assessments. The Committee Chair indicated there wasn't a need for an actual motion and this request could be brought up at the April Council meeting. Executive Director O'Keefe stated she can convey this information to the NEFSC director in advance of the April Council meeting to request a brief update, noting there is an update from the Fisheries Monitoring and Research Division (FMRD) scheduled for the June Council meeting which would be a good place to include an update on the biological port sampling efforts. The Council Chair supported giving the NEFSC director advance notice to prepare a response and added that it would also be important to understand not just if samples are being collected but if they are being processed.

Regarding the previous motions, Executive Director O'Keefe explained she will also provide these to the NEFSC director in advance of the Council meeting so he can prepare a response, characterizing these motions as a way to signal to the NEFSC that the Council is paying attention to how assessments will be completed rather than reacting after the fact. A committee member suggested the upcoming NRCC meeting as another place to bring up these topics given planning for assessments would be part of the agenda.

The meeting adjourned at 1:22 pm.