New England Fishery Management Council
50 WATER STREET | NEWBURYPORT, MASSACHUSETTS 01950 | PHONE 978 465 0492
Daniel Salerno, *Chair* | Cate O'Keefe, PhD, *Executive Director*

MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 20, 2026

TO: Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC)

FROM: Cate O'Keefe, Executive Director

SUBJECT: Terms of Reference and information for October 27-28 SSC meeting regarding fishing year 2027-2031 overfishing limits and acceptable biological catches for the Northeast multispecies stocks: Gulf of Maine haddock, American plaice, pollock, and Atlantic halibut, and the small-mesh multispecies stocks: northern silver hake, southern whiting, northern red hake, and southern red hake

RISK POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The Risk Policy process combines the Council's policy preferences with data to determine a level of risk tolerance (high, intermediate, low). The Risk Policy systematically accounts for factors that influence risk tolerance in Council decision making, and is an avenue to directly consider climate, ecosystem, and socioeconomic impacts, along with biological considerations. The Risk Policy also considers stability in decision making, including economic, resource, and management stability, as well as stability for harvesters with an aim to minimize abrupt shifts in catch limits. The Council's policy preferences were determined using a weighting exercise in June 2026, and the Groundfish and Small-mesh Multispecies Plan Development Teams (PDT) recently completed scoring of each factor in preparation for this meeting. For each stock, the SSC will receive output that will include the 2026 Risk Policy Matrix, Z-score, risk tiers, and an associated recommended probability of meeting management objectives. This information can be accessed at the Risk Policy Application and in the Risk Policy Report for each stock. The Risk Policy does not integrate directly with ABC control rules at this time, and output should be considered as additional information to support decision making.

NORTHEAST MULTISPECIES

Terms of Reference

A. Consider the results of the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's (NEFSC) 2026 management track assessments for Gulf of Maine haddock and American plaice, the 2026 data update for pollock, and information provided by the Council's Groundfish PDT.

B. Consider the NEFSC 2026 data update for Atlantic halibut, and information provided by the Council's Groundfish PDT including additional information from the Canadian stock assessment, research on tagging and genetics, and information on connectivity between Atlantic halibut in U.S. and Canadian waters. Comment on the suitability of this additional information to be considered best available science and appropriate for setting catch advice.

C. Recommend overfishing limits (OFL) and acceptable biological catches (ABC) for these four stocks for fishing years (FY) 2027 – 2031 that will prevent overfishing, be consistent with the Council's groundfish ABC control rule and rebuilding plans, and consider the Council's Risk Policy.

Groundfish ABC control rule

The ABC control rule for the Northeast Multispecies fishery management plan (FMP) 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.

Groundfish stock assessments/data updates

Gulf of Maine haddock. This stock had a management track assessment in 2026 which updated commercial fishery catch data, indices of abundance, the analytical Woods Hole Assessment Model (WHAM), and biological reference points through 2025. Additionally, stock projections were updated through 2031. The assessment builds on the prior management track assessment in 2024. The 2026 assessment was peer reviewed in September 2026 and concluded that as of 2025, Gulf of Maine haddock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring, consistent with the results of the 2024 assessment.

American plaice. This stock had a management track assessment in 2026 which updated commercial fishery catch data, indices of abundance, the analytical WHAM model, and biological reference points through 2025. The assessment builds on the prior management track assessment in 2024 and included age composition data to address high-priority research recommendations from the 2024 assessment. Additionally, stock projections were updated through 2031. The 2026 assessment was peer reviewed in September 2026 and concluded that as of 2025, American plaice is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring, consistent with the results of the 2024 assessment.

Pollock. In 2026, the NEFSC conducted a data update for this stock with projections, including updates to the survey biomass indices and fishery catch data through 2025. This was a data update from the prior management track assessment in 2024 that used an Age-Structured

Assessment Program (ASAP) assessment model to conclude that, as of 2023, the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring.

Atlantic halibut. In 2026, the NEFSC conducted a data update for this stock, including updates to the survey biomass indices and fishery catch data through 2025. This was a data update from the prior management track assessment in 2024 that used an empirical First Second Derivative (FSD) assessment model to conclude that, as of 2023, the overfished and overfishing statuses are unknown. The stock is in a rebuilding plan with a rebuild date of 2055.

In June 2026, the Council initiated Framework Adjustment 74 to set groundfish specifications and included in the scope to "set FY2027-FY2031 specifications for Atlantic halibut, exploring sources of best available science to support catch setting methods." The Groundfish Committee later tasked the PDT with reviewing sources of best available science for Atlantic halibut and developing alternative methods for setting halibut catch advice. The basis of this request centers on the uncertainties with the U.S. assessment approach that are driven by persistent questions about stock structure and connectivity between Atlantic halibut in U.S. and Canadian waters. The PDT has prepared a separate memo describing additional sources of information to set Atlantic halibut catch advice.

Specification setting

The SSC recommended FY 2025-2027 specifications for these four stocks on October 21, 2024. The Council expects to take final action at its December 2026 meeting. Specifications are expected to be implemented on May 1, 2027.

SMALL-MESH MULTISPECIES

Terms of Reference

A. Consider the results of the NEFSC 2026 data updates for northern silver hake, southern whiting, northern red hake, and southern red hake, and information provided by the Council's Small-Mesh Multispecies PDT.

B. Recommend OFLs and ABCs for these four stocks for fishing years FY 2027 – 2031 that will prevent overfishing, be consistent with the Council's ABC control rule and rebuilding plans, and consider the Council's Risk Policy.

Small-mesh multispecies ABC control rule

The ABC control rule for the Small-mesh Multispecies FMP sets ABC using a P* = 25% (silver hake) or P* = 40% (red hake). The southern red hake control rule applies an additional 25% reduction in specifications in accordance with the Council's stock rebuilding plan.

Small-mesh multispecies stock assessments/data updates

Northern silver hake and southern whiting. In 2026, the NEFSC conducted data updates for these stocks (southern whiting includes southern silver hake and offshore hake), including updates to the survey biomass indices and fishery catch data through 2025. These were data updates from the prior management track assessments in 2023 that used relative biomass (weight per tow) indices and commercial catch to conclude that, as of 2022, these stocks were not overfished and overfishing was not occurring.

Northern red hake and Southern red hake. In 2026, the NEFSC conducted a data update for these stocks, including updates to the survey biomass indices and fishery catch data through 2025. These were data updates from the prior management track assessments in 2023 that used an empirical efficiency-adjusted swept-area biomass approach to conclude that, as of 2022, the status of both red hake stocks is unknown.

Specification setting

The SSC recommended FY 2024-2026 specifications for these four stocks on October 27, 2023. The Council expects to take final action at its December 2026 meeting. Specifications are expected to be implemented on May 1, 2027.

INFORMATION

Northeast Multispecies

1. NEFSC Assessment/Data Update Reports
    a. Gulf of Maine haddock assessment presentation by Dr. C. Peretti, NEFSC
    b. Management Track Assessment of Gulf of Maine Haddock *(Melanogrammus aeglefinus)*, Fall 2026
    c. American plaice assessment presentation by Dr. A Hart, NEFSC
    d. Management Track Assessment of American Plaice *(Hippoglossoides platessoides)*, Fall 2026
    e. September 2026 Management Track Assessment Peer Review Report
    f. 2026 data updates for Atlantic pollock and Atlantic halibut
2. Groundfish Plan Development Team
    a. Presentation by Council staff
    b. Groundfish PDT memo to SSC re FY 2027 – 2031 OFLs and ABCs for Northeast multispecies stocks, October 20, 2026
    c. Groundfish PDT memo to SSC re Atlantic halibut catch setting methods for FY 2027 – 2031, October 20, 2026
    d. 2026 risk policy reports for Gulf of Maine haddock, American plaice, pollock, and Atlantic halibut
3. Groundfish fishery and other information
    a. American Plaice *(Hippoglossoides platessoides)* Snapshot Ecosystem and Socioeconomic Profile, Fall 2026
    b. FY 2024 Northeast Multispecies Fishery Year-end Catch Report, March 20, 2026
    c. Northeast Multispecies SAFE Report, including the most recent descriptions of the social and economic status of the fishery from Framework Adjustment 72, Affected Environment Human Communities (Section 4.4, p. 38-58)
4. Previous SSC recommendations
    a. Meeting materials, October 21, 2024

b. SSC report, November 13, 2024

Small-Mesh Multispecies

1. NEFSC 2026 data updates for small-mesh multispecies stocks
2. Small-Mesh Plan Development Team
    a. Presentation by Council staff
    b. Small-Mesh PDT memo to SSC re FY 2027 – 2031 OFLs and ABCs for small-mesh multispecies stocks, October 20, 2026
    c. 2026 risk policy reports for small-mesh multispecies stocks
3. Small-mesh multispecies fishery and other information
    a. Small-Mesh Multispecies Fishery Performance and Risk Policy Factor Data
    b. Amendment 19
    c. Framework Adjustment 62
    d. 2010 Benchmark Assessment
4. Previous SSC recommendations
    a. Meeting materials, October 27, 2023
    b. SSC report, November 15, 2023

Other Documents

1. Risk Policy Statement and Concept, August 11, 2026
2. Risk Policy Application
3. NEFSC Commercial Fishing Performance Measures portal
4. NEFSC State of the Ecosystem Reports for the Northeast U.S. Shelf
5. NEFSC Stock Assessment Support Information portal
6. NOAA 2024 Stock Status Table
7. Presentation on Other Business topics
8. Correspondence (if any)