



## New England Fishery Management Council

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## MEETING SUMMARY

### Habitat Plan Development Team

Webinar

December 8, 2025

11:00-12:30 p.m.

The Habitat Plan Development Team (PDT) met via webinar at 11:00 a.m. on December 8, 2025 to discuss (1) the status of and reflections on the 2025 EFH Framework, (2) planning for the 2026 EFH Framework, and (3) other 2026 Habitat work priorities. There were no additions or changes to the agenda.

**MEETING ATTENDANCE:** Michelle Bachman (PDT Chair), Jennifer Couture, and Julian Garrison (NEFMC); Sharon Benjamin (NMFS/GARFO); David Packer, Sabrina Pereira (NMFS GARFO); Dr. Peter Auster (University of Connecticut); Tori Kentner (MAFMC); Dr. Chris Haak (Monmouth University); Julia Livermore (Rhode Island DEM, DMF); Anne Simpson (Maine DMR); Dr. Fiona Hogan (RODA). In addition, one other person attended.

### KEY OUTCOMES

- The PDT received an update on the status of the 2025 EFH Framework, which is awaiting maps and species distribution model (SDM) outputs from final model runs and is still on track for submission by the end of the year.
- The PDT reflected on the 2025 process for updating EFH designations and soliciting feedback on draft maps and text descriptions from PDT and Advisory Panel (AP) members.
  - The PDT strongly suggested setting clear expectations for if and how feedback can be meaningfully incorporated into draft designations to help guide any request for feedback.
  - The PDT also encouraged staff to include representative visuals (e.g., of seafloor habitats) to make outreach materials more engaging.
- The PDT discussed the planned workflow and timeline for the 2026 EFH Framework, which will include the suggested improvements to the process and aim to include 16 of the remaining 18 NEFMC species.
  - In 2026, two of the 16, Atlantic sea scallops and Atlantic wolffish, will be on slightly different timelines due to the need for species-specific species distribution models (SDMs).
  - Staff intend to complete the modeling work for the 16 species but there is flexibility in the timing of final action (September 2027 versus January 2027) and the number of included species to account for model troubleshooting and/or other Habitat work priorities that may arise.
  - The remaining two species (Atlantic salmon and deep-sea red crab) are slated for 2027. Any other species not included in the 2026 EFH Framework could be deferred to 2027, as needed.
- The PDT received updates on the 2026 Habitat work priorities approved at the December Council meeting and discussed how these will be carried out.

### ***AGENDA ITEM #1 – REVIEW 2025 EFH FRAMEWORK***

Council staff reviewed the status of the 2025 EFH Framework. Staff noted that there had been technical issues with the final model runs for several species, but otherwise the framework document has been reviewed internally and only needs the final maps and species distribution model (SDM) outputs. Staff expect the framework to be ready to submit to GARFO by the end of 2025. One PDT member asked whether there would be an opportunity to review the final submitted version to ensure nothing is overlooked. Staff responded that there could be some additional time for detailed PDT review concurrent with GARFO's review. Another PDT member asked if the PDT could examine the previously drafted NEPA impacts analysis section, which had been removed because the document qualifies for a Categorical Exclusion. Staff agreed to share this section with the PDT members for reference.

Staff then led a discussion reflecting on the 2025 EFH updates and engagement process, noting successes, challenges, and future improvements. A major lesson from the 2025 process was that engagement was most effective with individuals or small groups and when using simpler outreach materials. PDT members offered a variety of suggestions for soliciting feedback from species PDT and AP members. For example, one PDT member recommended including visuals in the outreach documents (e.g., seafloor imagery) to promote engagement and to provide habitat context. PDT members also encouraged staff to set clear expectations regarding whether, and to what extent, feedback can be incorporated into the EFH designations and why. There was concern that EFH feedback received to date was a "checking the box" exercise; staff appreciated this feedback on the process and expressed interest in continued conversations about how feedback can be meaningfully included. For egg and larvae revised EFH designations, the PDT discussed whether it would be more transparent to not produce a separate egg and/or larval map if data are insufficient. In the absence of an egg or larval map, EFH consultation staff would defer to the EFH designation text description and the juvenile and/or adult map to estimate whether an activity might cause impacts to egg or larval stages. The PDT also noted that it would be valuable to check the distribution of eggs and larvae from any data available against the juvenile and adult maps to assess how well the juvenile or adult maps may represent egg and larval distributions. As noted during prior meetings, egg and larval data are not available for all species.

#### ***Public Comments:***

There were no public comments on this agenda item.

#### ***Follow-Ups:***

**Bachman, Garrison** – share the removed impacts analysis draft with the PDT for reference; further consider and identify how to incorporate staff and PDT feedback on the 2025 process for the 2026 EFH revised designation process.

### ***AGENDA ITEM #2 – PLANNING FOR 2026 EFH FRAMEWORK***

Council staff gave a presentation on the action plan for the upcoming 2026 EFH Framework, including the workflow, timeline, and immediate next steps—this framework was a 2026 Habitat work priority approved at the December 2025 Council meeting. Staff noted that separate SDMs will be developed for Atlantic sea scallops and Atlantic wolffish, respectively, due to data limitations in trawl surveys and to leverage other, more targeted data sources like the NMFS scallop dredge survey. As a reminder, all revised EFH designations in 2025 used the Community Basis Function Model. The PDT discussed environmental variables to be included in the scallop models, noting that some of the variables may be autocorrelated, and suggested using longline survey data for the wolffish model. Additionally, geological distribution maps of seafloor features could be useful for updating wolffish EFH since the fish lay and tend to their eggs among boulder piles. Staff intend to finalize model runs for the 2026 species while the modeling contractor, Dr. Haak, is still on contract with NEFMC. However, staff recognized the potential need to account for model troubleshooting and other Habitat work priorities that may arise; therefore, there is flexibility in the timing of final action for the framework (September 2026 versus January 2027)

and the number of included species. Any species not included in the 2026 EFH Framework could be deferred to 2027, as needed. Finally, given the number of remaining groundfish species, staff plan to split up the 13 groundfish species into smaller subsets for feedback and engagement. For each of those species groups, staff will engage groundfish PDT subgroups based on member availability and species-specific expertise.

*Public Comments:*

There were no public comments on this agenda item.

*Follow-Ups:*

There were no specific follow-up tasks on this agenda item.

***AGENDA ITEM #3 – OTHER 2026 WORK ITEMS***

Council staff discussed the other 2026 Habitat work priorities that were approved at the December 2025 Council meeting and how they will be carried out. These included (1) analysis of habitat impacts of Council actions; (2) preparation of habitat and fishery comments on non-fishing activities; (3) contribution to Habitat and ocean planning science and management partnerships; (4) advancement of Fishing Effects Model analyses, integration of habitat information into Council initiatives, maintenance of expertise, sharing of products with regional partners; and (5) evaluation of Great South Channel (GSC) Habitat Management Area (HMA) surfclam exemption areas. Staff noted that there was discussion during the December Council meeting about revisiting the development of scallop access areas in the HMA on the Northern Edge of Georges Bank, however, this was not added to the 2026 Council priorities list. Staff also offered to share occasional, high-level updates on ocean planning activities with the PDT. PDT members appreciated this idea, given the frequently changing landscape of these issues, especially with respect to offshore wind.

*Public Comments:*

There were no public comments on this agenda item.

*Follow-Ups:*

**Couture** (ongoing) – Periodically share slide deck tracking ocean planning issues with Habitat PDT.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 12:30 p.m.