



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEETING SUMMARY

Habitat Plan Development Team

Webinar

April 30, 2026

1:00-3:30 p.m.

The Habitat Plan Development Team (PDT) met via webinar at 1:00 p.m. on April 30, 2026 to (1) evaluate the Dedicated Habitat Research Areas (DHRAs) and recommend whether to sunset or maintain the Georges Bank and/or Stellwagen DHRAs, and also to review the Jordan Basin DHRA research updates summary; (2) discuss the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (GSC HMA) clam exemption program evaluation, including a review of the report outline and background sections and an update on information sources; and (3) continue reviewing 2026 Essential Fish Habitat designation updates with a focus on inshore mapping checks. No other business was discussed.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Michelle Bachman (PDT Chair) and Julian Garrison (NEFMC); Melissa Smith (Habitat Committee Chair); Sharon Benjamin, Sabrina Pereira (NMFS GARFO); Dr. Peter Auster (University of Connecticut); Jessica Coakley, Tori Kentner (MAFMC); Dr. Chris Haak (Monmouth University); Julia Livermore (Rhode Island DEM, DMF); Dr. Fiona Hogan (RODA). Alice Stratton (Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary) attended in support of the Stellwagen DHRA discussion, and Doug Potts (NMFS GARFO) attended in support of the GSC HMA exemption program evaluation. In addition, four other people attended.

KEY OUTCOMES

- The PDT recommended retaining the Stellwagen DHRA based on documented past, ongoing, and potential future research that addresses habitat research questions posed by the Council via Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2.
- The PDT recommended retaining the Georges Bank DHRA pending further discussion of opportunity costs. Specifically, these costs are related to providing for future research opportunities in a management area where fishing activity has been controlled since 1994 vs. facilitating potential harvest opportunities should gear restrictions associated with the DHRA be lifted.
- Staff will prepare a memo on behalf of the PDT to communicate the DHRA recommendations to the Advisory Panel and Committee.
- The PDT was comfortable with the direction of the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area Clam Dredge Exemption Program Review, which is planned to be an evaluation of habitat and fishery information in the three existing exemption areas, informed by studies of other portions of the Great South Channel HMA and considering within a regional habitat management and fisheries context. The evaluation will not develop alternatives to adjust the exemption program but is intended to support a Council decision about whether to prioritize a management action to develop such alternatives in the future. The PDT recommended being clear with the Committee and Council about what work is possible this year given available resources.

- The Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) discussion focused on clarifying the inshore data processing and map development workflow, i.e., how fisheries independent surveys, environmental conditions, and information from the literature are combined to generate the maps. Based on this discussion, staff will explore a couple of different mapping approaches and work to communicate the workflow more effectively. Staff will provide designation briefing documents, i.e., EFH primers, for review following the meeting and will seek input on text description details via correspondence.
- The PDT is leaning towards not developing separate egg and larval maps, only separate text to pair with the juvenile and adult maps but plans to explore egg and larval data from the NOAA Ecosystem Monitoring (EcoMon) survey before finalizing this recommendation.
- Staff will provide EFH maps and text for the four remaining species (scallops, offshore hake, halibut, and wolffish) as they become available and will schedule the next PDT meeting once these are ready for review.

AGENDA ITEM #1 – DEDICATED HABITAT RESEARCH AREA EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATION

Council staff gave a presentation on the Georges Bank and Stellwagen Dedicated Habitat Research Area (DHRA) evaluation, including background on their purpose, initial creation and subsequent three-year review cycles, criteria for continuation, research questions addressed, and research activities in both DHRAs. Staff noted that recent scallop resource surveys in the Georges Bank DHRA indicated ~0 mt biomass and no recruitment in the DHRA. Staff also recapped the GARFO report on research activities in both DHRAs discussed at the April 1st PDT meeting: in the Georges Bank DHRA, the main research occurring is the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) spring and fall bottom trawl surveys, which include the Ecosystem Monitoring (EcoMon) ichthyoplankton surveys; there is no current research occurring focused on DHRA-specific questions. In the Stellwagen DHRA, in addition to the NEFSC bottom trawl surveys, staff noted several research activities that rely on the DHRA designation: two Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary (SBNMS) projects and a Gloucester Marine Genomics Institute eDNA study. One PDT member also noted Dr. Les Kaufman’s (Boston University) involvement with the collaborative SBNMS, Mystic Aquarium, and University of Connecticut research on natural disturbance patterns and processes in the Stellwagen DHRA.

Staff noted that these DHRAs were retained during the first three-year review in 2022 but are up for review again; at its June meeting, the Council will provide a recommendation on whether to retain or sunset one or both DHRAs, and this recommendation does not need to be the same for both DHRAs. As such, the Habitat Committee chair had asked the PDT to provide input to support upcoming Habitat AP and Committee discussions and recommendations to the Council on these DHRAs. Staff emphasized that removal of the Stellwagen DHRA would not change overlapping Western Gulf of Maine Habitat Management or Closure Area designations nor change fishing access to the area, whereas removing the Georges Bank DHRA would allow fishing access, as no other management areas overlap that DHRA.

The PDT discussed whether to retain or sunset either or both Georges Bank and Stellwagen DHRAs. PDT members emphasized that there are likely opportunity costs to losing the DHRA designations, noting generally that areas closed to fishing (including the DHRAs) have been valuable for habitat, productivity, climate change, and managed species status comparisons within and outside closed areas and that this research has been used in analyses of alternatives and characterizing the affected environment for Council actions. The PDT member suggested acknowledging these opportunity costs in the DHRA evaluation report. One PDT member cautioned that sunsetting the DHRAs may require creation of new closed areas to provide the same level of comparative insights. The PDT member noted that lost or delayed research insights are especially relevant given changing resources and environments and that these concerns may be more pertinent in the Georges Bank DHRA as there is less existing research on which to fall back. Notably, the area that is now the Georges Bank DHRA has been closed under other related actions since December 1994. Council staff noted that the Council had discussed similar opportunity costs during the

2022 DHRA review, and there was not a substantial desire for access to those areas at the time; ultimately, there are tradeoffs between opportunity costs of research and fishing opportunities.

Another PDT member asked whether the Council had ever evaluated the ability of DHRA designations to support fishery management actions, for example how research in the DHRAs has been used to inform management. Council staff responded that the Council has not framed the question in that way before nor have there been management actions taken since Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2 (OHA2) that would directly use the research data in a management or fishing context. Note that OHA2 suggests a ten-year review cycle for habitat management measures, which would put an evaluation around 2028. The PDT member noted that, since there have been funding challenges recently, it could be worthwhile to consider for the DHRA evaluation how ongoing research can actively support management actions. Finally, one PDT member suggested the DHRAs could provide insights for the Affected Environment sections of fisheries management action documents. The PDT made the following recommendations by consensus:

- (1) **Retain the Stellwagen DHRA**, based on continuation criteria for documented active and ongoing research, approved research proposals, and/or funding requests for research focused on DHRA topics. In addition, these research activities have been discussed in a habitat management context, and there are likely steep opportunity costs for comparative research within and outside the DHRA should the designation be removed.
- (2) **Retain the Georges Bank DHRA**, pending further discussion on opportunity costs of removing the DHRA and on tradeoffs with potential for economic opportunities.

Three other research areas have been identified by the Council: the Jordan Basin DHRA and the Rose and Crown and Davis Bank research areas in the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (GSC HMA). These areas are not subject to sunset provision, and no Council action is currently required. A Jordan Basin research activity summary was prepared to inform the Committee and Council about how that area is being used. One PDT member noted that the Outer Schoodic Ridge area is an important area for comparison with the Jordan Basin DHRA in the context of recovery potential of corals. The Rose and Crown and Davis Bank areas will be discussed in the context of the GSC HMA surfclam exemption program evaluation so a research summary was not prepared now.

Public Comments:

- **Ms. Stratton (Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary)** noted a planned economic analysis of fishing and ecotourism spillover effects within and adjacent to the Stellwagen DHRA.

Follow-Ups:

- **Bachman** – Draft a short memo from the plan team summarizing issues, research studies, and recommendations regarding the Stellwagen and Georges Bank DHRAs, and circulate to PDT members for review and comment.
- **Bachman** – Finalize Jordan Basin research activities summary.

AGENDA ITEM #2 – GREAT SOUTH CHANNEL HMA SURFCLAM EXEMPTION PROGRAM EVALUATION

Council staff gave a presentation on the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (GSC HMA) surfclam exemption program evaluation, which is a Council work priority for 2026. The [Executive Committee priorities recommendation](#) memo noted that there has been high stakeholder interest in this topic and that the work should focus on an evaluation of existing and emerging information, including information from multi-year research conducted under an Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP). However, this evaluation should not supersede the 2026 EFH designation action as a top habitat priority.

Staff discussed the planned scope of the evaluation, including what is within and outside scope. In particular, the evaluation will focus on the effectiveness of the surfclam area in the HMA from both habitat conservation and fishery perspectives by considering recent data, information, and tradeoffs between these two issues. In contrast, effectiveness of the two research areas, habitat or surfclam resource conditions in portions of the HMAs outside of the three exemption areas, suggestions for new or revised exemption areas, and the blue mussel harvest aspect of the exemption program are all beyond the scope of the evaluation. Staff also described the intended workplan and information to include in the evaluation report, such as habitat and managed species information as well as information about the surfclam resource and fishery. Staff noted that they have already begun assembling background information for the report and plan to review the draft report with the PDT several times before presenting it to the AP, Committee, and Council in August and September for review. This timing allows the Council to consider the evaluation in advance of the December priorities discussion, where the Council could decide whether to develop an action to revise the exemption program.

Staff sought feedback from the PDT on the evaluation scope, workplan, and engagement opportunities with the Mid-Atlantic Council (e.g., via membership on the Habitat PDT and/or Committee). One PDT member echoed staff concerns about including blue mussel harvest in the evaluation, noting that while it is an important consideration and that the PDT has had prior discussions about the role of mussels as EFH vs as a resource to be exploited, there would need to be more time for in-depth analyses and discussions focused on blue mussels. Another PDT member asked how staff plan to evaluate the effectiveness of the exemption areas; staff responded that they are considering the conservation value of the exemption areas and how various managed species are expected to benefit from the HMA and exemption areas. For example, allowing exemptions in some areas can allow other areas of the HMA to be protected.

One PDT member recognized the need for thorough, robust analysis of the information sources but also expressed concern about whether the timeline is too ambitious. For example, finer scale Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) data had been requested as there would likely be challenges comparing fishing vs habitat areas if using 60-minute or 30-minute ping rates but analysis of VMS data can be time-consuming. If these finer-scale VMS data are not available by midsummer but are deemed essential to the evaluation, staff should clearly communicate to the Council that additional time would be needed for the review. Alternatively, these data could be analyzed at a later time, for example during development of a management action. Council staff responded that they have been considering management and priorities cycles, upcoming AP, Committee, and Council meetings, and the potential for additional data sources that may become available. At the upcoming AP, Committee, and Council meetings in May and June, staff intend to seek feedback on the scope, information sources, and workplan, given an intent to draft the evaluation prior to the Council's September meeting. Then, given the draft report, the Council could consider whether there is sufficient analysis / information to inform the December priorities discussion or whether to request additional analysis, which could continue into 2027. The PDT member also noted that preparation of the Mid-Atlantic Council's fishery performance reports was shifted back and is now slated for July; the PDT member suggested sharing out the timeline and upcoming meeting dates to Mid-Atlantic advisory groups for awareness.

Public Comments:

- **Doug Potts (GARFO Sustainable Fisheries Division)** noted that VMS defaults to a 60-minute ping rate (30-minute or recently 5-minute for vessels with scallop permits) and that it can be challenging to distinguish trips in exemption areas vs those fishing in the research areas under an EFP. Additionally, the regional office had recently issued an extension on the Coonamessett Farm Foundation (CFF) EFP to allow for additional compensation fishing. Council staff plan to follow up with CFF and/or GARFO staff on the expected timing of final report from that EFP.

Follow-Ups:

- **Bachman** – Follow up with Dan Hocking, GARFO Analysis and Program Support Division, regarding the status and timing of fishing effort data analysis for the Great South Channel HMA exemption evaluation.
- **Bachman** – Follow up with Natalie Jennings (CFF) (and/or Ryan Silva, GARFO) regarding the expected timing of the final report from the Coonamessett Farm Foundation EFP and any potential delays.
- **Bachman** – Share upcoming Habitat Advisory Panel and Committee meeting information with MAFMC staff to share with their clam advisors.

AGENDA ITEM #3 – 2026 EFH UPDATES

Council staff gave a presentation on work completed since the April 1 PDT meeting and upcoming timelines for additional designation development. Recent focus has been on a detailed review of inshore occurrences to support EFH delineation in estuarine and coastal zones, as well as on drafting EFH text. Comparisons with No Action maps were made as a check of the updated maps. Some errors have been identified and are being fixed. Council staff sought feedback from the PDT on including specific bays and estuaries in the text descriptions, the extent to which inshore text-based zones are included absent model footprint or occurrence-based data, and approaches to updating egg and larval maps (which do not have SDM-based updates but do have EcoMon data for most of the 2026 species). Staff also reviewed the EFH feedback and engagement process, which will occur from May through July and incorporates feedback from the 2025 EFH updates. Finally, staff noted that there has not been staff work on Atlantic sea scallop, Atlantic wolffish, offshore hake, or Atlantic halibut maps and text, but staff and the Council's contractor, Dr. Haak, have discussed timelines for modeling these four species to support development of their updated EFH maps.

PDT members emphasized that inshore areas are important for the EFH consultation process and that it is preferable to include suitable habitat areas even if they do not overlap or are not adjacent to model-predicted EFH areas or occurrence-based zones. One PDT member was concerned that the established set of decision rules for designating inshore zones could be leaving out areas where the species occurs / has occurred, and was somewhat unclear on how the different information sources are combined. Council staff responded that they can re-share the methods document and potentially revisit how those inshore methods are described to make them clearer. Staff also noted that it could be useful to generate maps that include additional suitable zones for comparison with the current draft maps. Dr. Haak also pointed out that the methods and thresholds used in the inshore and model-based are fundamentally distinct, but it could be useful to explore ways to align those thresholds. One PDT member confirmed the utility of including, if known, specific parts of bays and estuaries in the text descriptions for EFH consultations. Note that it is possible to modify the maps in a more ad hoc manner to include or exclude specific locations based on available evidence after the survey, model-based, and environmental data decision rules are applied. In general, it seems preferable to avoid too many ad hoc modifications of the maps, but the PDT recognized that there are likely to be information sources that do not fit neatly within the automated mapping framework.

PDT members discussed how to approach updates for egg and larval maps. One PDT member asked whether there is a threshold for including EcoMon ichthyoplankton data; staff noted a specific threshold would need further discussion. Another PDT member clarified that at the advice of NEFSC, the Ecosystem Dynamics and Assessment Branch is processing and displaying the EcoMon data by strata (vs. by station) and that they were willing to collaborate with the PDT; the PDT member suggested that it could be more feasible to use the information that is already processed.

Public Comments:

- **Gabriella Feil (GARFO HESD)** noted that EcoMon is a long-term survey by large regions, and inference should occur at the level of EcoMon stratum rather than by tow (whereas Council staff have been examining other inshore data by tow). Council staff plan to follow up with Ms. Feil and other HESD staff about the use of EcoMon data and will develop a test case for one species before applying it to the other 2026 species.

Follow-Ups:

Garrison – Re-share EFH methods document with PDT, highlighting inshore approaches section; confirm mean/median in estuarine zones

Garrison – Prepare a few slides that highlight essential elements of inshore methods that will support effective engagement with draft maps and text

Garrison/Haak – Consider analytical approach that could be used to bridge the gap between disparate inshore vs. Model-based approaches, especially in cases where we might consider limiting the designation by latitude (e.g., winter flounder)

Garrison/Pereira – Reach out to GARFO Habitat and Ecosystem Services Division (HESD) staff with questions about specific inshore locations, e.g., groundtruthing species occurrence, consultation needs

Garrison/Bachman/Pereira – Follow up with Gabby Feil on HESD's work with EcoMon data; investigate data for one species as a test case before doing additional work

Garrison – Develop EFH outreach briefs with discussion questions and share with PDT

Garrison – Distribute draft EFH text for comment by PDT

Haak – Continue modeling for data poor species

Bachman – schedule follow up PDT meeting to review when ready

The meeting adjourned at approximately 3:30 p.m.