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New England Fishery Management Council

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MEETING SUMMARY

Habitat Plan Development Team

Webinar

August 4, 2026

10:00 am.-12:00 p.m.

The Habitat Plan Development Team (PDT) met via webinar at 10:00 a.m. on August 4, 2026 to receive a presentation on a research project in the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (GSC HMA) and discuss progress to date on the clam exemption program evaluation report. The PDT also received updates on the 2026 Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) work focusing on model outputs for data-poor species including Atlantic halibut and Atlantic wolffish, and feedback received on Atlantic sea scallops and other large and small mesh groundfish species during recent PDT and small group meetings.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: PDT members included Michelle Bachman (PDT Chair), Jessica Coakley (MAFMC), Jennifer Couture (NEFMC), Julian Garrison (NEFMC), Dr. Fiona Hogan (Triton Research Institute), David Packer (NMFS NEFSC), Sabrina Pereira (NMFS GARFO), and Anne Simpson (Maine DMR). Natalie Jennings, Farrell Davis, Justin Potter, and Ryan Munnelly attended in support of the GSC HMA research project discussion. Dr. Chris Haak (Monmouth University) and Tori Kentner (MAFMC) attended in support of the EFH discussion. Other GARFO and NEFMC staff: Gabby Feil, Doug Potts, Doug Christel, and Thomas Heimann (NOAA GARFO) and Alex Dunn (NEFMC). In addition, three other people attended.

KEY OUTCOMES

- The PDT appreciated the presentation by Natalie Jennings and Coonamessett Farm Foundation (CFF) staff about their research in the GSC HMA and suggested some additional information and analysis to include the report.
- The PDT discussed various sections of the draft NEFMC GSC HMA Surfclam Exemption Program Review Report being prepared. A complete draft will be shared with the PDT next week for review and then a draft will be provided to the Habitat Advisory Panel (AP) and Committee in time for their August 20th meeting, around August 13th.
- The PDT received progress updates on the 2026 EFH Framework, including model development for Atlantic halibut, Atlantic sea scallops, Atlantic wolffish, and offshore hake as well as feedback received from species and industry experts to date. Habitat staff are in the process of incorporating feedback and will share a draft of the framework document with the PDT to review during its August 13 meeting. Following PDT review, the Habitat AP and Committee will review and recommend a preferred alternative during their August 20th meeting.
- Habitat and GARFO staff will review pending and planned EFH map adjustments based on feedback received from species experts at a follow-up meeting prior to the August 13 PDT meeting.

AGENDA REVIEW AND PLANNING FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

The chair reviewed the agenda and the schedule for upcoming meetings including the joint Habitat Advisory Panel and Committee meeting on August 20th in New Bedford, MA and the September 15-17 Council meeting in Plymouth, MA. The Council is expected to review the GSC HMA Surfclam Exemption Program Review Report and recommend a final preferred EFH alternative during the September Council meeting.

AGENDA ITEM #1 – GREAT SOUTH CHANNEL HMA SURFCLAM EXEMPTION PROGRAM REVIEW

Ms. Jennings and her colleagues at Coonamessett Farm Foundation (CFF) reviewed the results¹ of their Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP)-based research project in the Great South Channel HMA (GSC HMA). This project included multiple optical (drop camera) and acoustic (multibeam) surveys of a portion of the Davis Bank East research area, and compensation fishing in the Davis Bank East and Rose & Crown research areas. The optical survey generated data on the occurrence of different benthic substrate components (gravel, epifauna, shell hash) at each survey station. These were used to groundtruth backscatter data collected via the multibeam surveys. Backscatter is a measure of acoustic reflectance used to estimate bottom hardness across an area. The study found that the backscatter values in the Davis Bank East research area accurately discriminated between sand wave vs. gravel bottom but could not reliably identify areas with vs. without epifauna unless they were verified with the optical data. The multibeam data were used to compile bathymetry maps at a high 25-cm spatial resolution. By comparing the bathymetry maps over the three survey periods, the team found that sand waves generally migrated in a northeast to southwest direction and used the difference in bathymetry values to estimate net sediment movement into and out of the research area. Overall, the Davis Bank East research area is highly dynamic, with noted movement of bedforms between surveys. The substrate is heavily dominated by pebble sized gravels in some locations and sand in other locations, with shell hash common in some areas. Cobble- and boulder-sized gravels were relatively uncommon in this part of the GSC HMA. Epifauna consisted mostly of hydroids, bryozoans, and barnacles.

The compensation fishing element of the study allowed for estimates of clam catch rates and a characterization of fishing effort in terms of location and area swept. Data were collected for a subset of trips that carried a scientific observer (25% of compensation trips), and trips were selected for observation based on when scientific personnel were available. Substrate and other seafloor characteristics were compared between stations proximate to and distant from compensation fishing locations to estimate the effects of fishing. Overall, this analysis found that proximity to tow paths had a significant negative effect on bryozoan coverage, and a significant positive effect on the number of stations with ‘other’ shells observed (mussel and clam shells were annotated separately). Other seafloor variables including other epifauna types and different gravel and shell components did not show a difference when comparing stations closer to and further from the fishing areas. There was little change in backscatter patterns in fished vs non-fished areas.

PDT members appreciated the presentation and asked a range of questions about the CFF report.

- *Clarification on methods and results of fishing effects analysis:* Mr. Farrell Davis explained that they evaluated changes at 14 drop camera stations in the vicinity of the 177 observed tows, assigning areas categorically as fished or unfished. Distance between the stations and observed tows explained most of the variance in the observed substrate components. CFF staff noted that they do not have locations for unobserved tows, but that they may be able to obtain them from participating fishermen and expand the analysis to include those tows, which could allow them to increase the sample size in terms of the number of drop camera stations examined.

¹ Once available, finalized report will be housed on the [meeting webpage](#) for the August 20, 2026 joint Habitat Advisory Panel and Committee meeting.

- *Fishing effort estimates:* The PDT requested that the fishing effort be summarized in terms of bushels per hour fished, since this is how data are summarized for the broader fishery, and would also find it useful if tow speeds were included in the report. The PDT noted that they planned to compare fishing metrics such as swept area per tow and trip and tow speeds with the assumptions used in the Fishing Effects Model, which could help the PDT to understand if Fishing Effects might be over or under estimating fishing disturbance in the GSC HMA.
- *How is sediment transport estimated?* The net change in sediment volume across time periods was estimated by subtracting the continuous raster bathymetry datasets from each other. Mr. Ryan Munnelly noted that the larger features remain recognizable across time periods, but the movement of sand waves is very evident when looking at finer spatial scales. The sand waves are large (tens of meters) relative to the resolution of the data (25 cm) so movement is readily detectable. Ms. Jennings noted that they could share the data files with the Council if needed.
- *Could generalized habitat type polygons be derived from these data, for ease of interpretation?* Yes, this could be done. CFF staff also emphasized that there is a lot of variation in what features occur in sand-dominated stations; some contain pebbles and occasional cobbles, and many contain shell hash. The group discussed how the image annotation was done and confirmed that, regardless of the dominant features in each image, presence of all sediment size classes, shell types, and attached epifauna types were noted as present or absent in each image, and that all annotations were done manually by two analysts.
- *Comparison between Davis Bank East and Rose & Crown:* CFF staff noted that the range of backscatter values in Davis Bank East are relatively narrow, as compared to other locations within the HMA such as Rose & Crown, which has finer mud sediments and more areas of cobble and boulder. CFF also noted that the drop camera images from this study can't be directly compared to imagery from the prior EFP study which used dredge-mounted cameras primarily, along with some camera stand work. Occurrence of different benthic features could be compared. The PDT suggested discussing similarities and differences Davis Bank East and Rose & Crown in the report, to the extent that the data allow.
- *Temperature data:* The PDT wondered if the bottom temperature observations collected during the drop camera surveys had been compared to other sources of information, e.g., GLORYS. CFF staff noted that they had looked into the GLORYS dataset but had not dug deeply into it, as the spatial resolution is larger than in this study.
- *Size composition of surfclams:* The results showed a different size composition of surfclams harvested during compensation trips by season. The reason for this is unknown, but the PDT discussed that it might have to do with temperature fluctuations across seasons and differential depth of burial and thus, availability to the gear by size.

Next, the PDT discussed other sections of the Surfclam Exemption Program Review Report being prepared by Council staff.

- *Habitat use by managed species:* Staff plan to examine whether EFH is designated, whether there is an EFH hotspot (top 25th percentile of model outputs), and what the cumulative density maps show. Hotspots in the cumulative density estimates would indicate that the GSC HMA is a key area for the species / life stage.
- *Cod spawning:* Staff will summarize the results of acoustic surveys, which were analyzed in the Southern New England Habitat Area of Particular Concern (HAPC) framework, and note available data for acoustic receivers located close to the HMA. These data have not been analyzed yet to see if there are Atlantic cod detections but could be analyzed in the future. Council staff have discussed this with NEFSC acoustic program staff.
- *Clam resource information:* Staff will note the lack of NEFSC survey data in the HMA., Staff will summarize key results from the non-NEFSC "East of Nantucket" survey that occurred in 2017, and will summarize any pertinent findings from papers that were published based on that

survey, following completion of the 2020 Clam Dredge Framework. Dr. Roger Mann at VIMS may have additional analyses to contribute.

- *Fishery dependent data:* Staff have already summarized these data in the report and are open to feedback on this section. Some discussion around uncertainty in the estimates of effort by area will be added.

AGENDA ITEM #2 – 2026 EFH UPDATES

Council staff and Dr. Haak reviewed progress on the 2026 EFH Framework since the last PDT meeting, including updates on model and map development for Atlantic sea scallops, Atlantic halibut, Atlantic wolffish, and offshore hake; a summary of feedback received to date on the draft EFH designations; other updates to the EFH framework document; and planned revisions and next steps.

The offshore hake model is still in development, but Dr. Haak noted that it is a simpler task and thus has prioritized model development for the other three species. For halibut and wolffish, initial longline-trawl integration tests showed that individual models (trawl-only and longline-only) struggle to predict to the other survey, while the longline-trawl integrated models do not necessarily improve model performance. That said, integration is still useful as it provides better representation of habitat types for adult halibut and wolffish. However, juveniles rarely appear in the longline data. As such, for both species, Dr. Haak plans to use trawl-only models for juveniles and integrated models for adults.

For scallops, Dr. Haak and colleagues explored drop camera integration but realized it would require several months of development; for EFH purposes, the dredge-trawl integration will likely be sufficient for this year's EFH Framework action. Dr. Haak also added a temporal component to the scallop model, which captures pronounced interannual dynamics. Compared to the non-temporal model, the current model can aggregate and resolve data at finer spatiotemporal scales. Council staff presented the updated model outputs from this model and reviewed feedback received from the Scallop PDT. Notably, PDT members had strong concerns about the use of trawl data because trawl catchability is highly affected by habitat type (i.e. complexity). The Scallop PDT also were concerned about model predictions in waters off Portland, ME and the area extending south beyond the Nantucket Lightship Scallop Area Management Simulator (SAMS) area, as these are beyond the expected distribution of scallops. The Scallop PDT suggested using a depth cutoff of 180 m (100 fathoms) to account for shifting scallop distributions to deeper waters as bottom temperatures increase and will include a note on the regional differences in depth limits in the Scallop EFH text description.

Staff reviewed other feedback received throughout the summer—which included suggestions for areas to remove, information to enhance text descriptions, and ways to present the maps that are familiar to species and industry experts (e.g., nautical chart overlays, SAMS area overlays, etc.)—and reviewed next steps for the framework. The Habitat PDT discussed how to manually, and on an ad hoc basis, trim inshore zones and deepwater areas where there are few occurrences, based on feedback for specific species / life stages from experts including stock assessment leads. GARFO staff suggested a follow-up call to review pending and completed map adjustments; Council staff echoed this suggestion and noted that they also plan to summarize species-specific map adjustments in the framework document and as a table in the detailed methods appendix.

Staff also reviewed initial explorations on the use of Ecosystem Monitoring (EcoMon) ichthyoplankton data to groundtruth egg and larval maps: while it could be a promising resource, further consideration and discussions are needed and likely would not be ready in time for final action in September. One PDT member noted that EcoMon is limited to the NEFSC trawl survey footprint, so it may not capture inshore egg/larvae, and suggested exploring those data further as part of the next EFH review. The PDT agreed with this approach and suggested following the same methods as last year, using the literature to help inform selection of proxy maps based on juvenile and/or adult EFH maps.

Finally, staff noted concerns raised about the inshore designation approach, which aggregates inshore catch data into cells and then uses those cells to designate inshore / coastal zone polygons. This approach leads to some cells being identified as EFH due to low sample size (e.g., one catch in three tows meets the 25% frequency of occurrence threshold); Dr. Haak suggested omitting the cell approach and aggregating data from inshore tows by zones instead. Given the timing and desire for consistency in approaches across species, the PDT agreed to stick with this approach but consider revisions to it for the next EFH review. The PDT suggested adding a “Next Steps” section to the framework appendices (i.e., in Appendix E: Detailed EFH Methods), to capture the EcoMon and inshore methods suggestions and other improvements for future EFH updates.

AGENDA ITEM #3 – OCEAN PLANNING

Council staff noted recent comment letters on ocean mining and space launch programs, which are available on the Council’s website and can be shared in advance of the joint Habitat AP / Committee meeting on August 20th.

Follow-Ups (all agenda topics):

- **Bachman** – continue development of the Council’s Great South Channel Surfcclam Exemption Program Review Report and send to PDT for review
- **Bachman** – reach out to clam experts, industry members, and GARFO APSD staff as needed to seek feedback and answer questions
- **Garrison** – send draft scallop EFH maps and model outputs to Scallop AP for feedback, including summarized Scallop PDT feedback
- **Garrison** – compile table of EFH map adjustments, schedule a follow-up call with GARFO staff (Pereira, Feil, Heimann, Chiarella) to review
- **Garrison** – coordinate with Dr. Haak on documenting “data-unique” SDM methods (halibut, scallops, wolffish, offshore hake)
- **Garrison** – prepare 2026 EFH Framework document and appendices for Habitat PDT, AP, and CTE review
- **Haak** – continue developing and finalizing models and outputs for data-unique species
- **Haak** – send model outputs to Habitat staff for all species: observed/predicted maps, smooth terms plots, model performance (cross-validation) if available

The meeting adjourned at approximately 12:04 p.m.