

Groundfish Specifications

Robin Frede, Groundfish Plan Coordinator

Scientific and Statistical Committee

Boston, MA and by Webinar

October 8, 2025



TERMS OF REFERENCE

- A. Consider the results of the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's (NEFSC) 2025 data updates for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish and information provided by the Council's Groundfish Plan Development Team (PDT).
- B. Recommend an OFL and ABC for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish for FY 2026 – 2030 that will prevent overfishing, be consistent with the Council's groundfish ABC control rule and rebuilding plan for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish, and consider the Council's Risk Policy Statement and Concept.

Council's Groundfish Control Rule

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.

Background

- This year a data update was provided for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish in lieu of management track assessments in 2025, which did not include using the assessment methods for setting catch advice.
- The SSC has traditionally recommended groundfish specifications at three-year intervals, but recent reductions in federal agency resources have highlighted a potential need for increased flexibility in management and regulatory processes. Thus, rather than recommend specifications for FY2026-2028, the SSC is asked to make recommendations for a five-year period, considering specifications for FY2029 and FY2030 should future gaps in federal resources prevent the provision of updated data.

Ocean Pout

2025 NEFSC Data Update



New England
Fishery Management Council

2025 NEFSC Data Update

The NEFSC provided a data update in lieu of a management track assessment in 2025. This update included landings and discards through 2024 (landings beginning in 1964 and discards beginning in 1968), spring bottom trawl survey indices from 1968 through 2025 (biomass, kg/tow) and stratified mean indices at length (numbers/tow) for the bottom trawl survey from 1968 through 2025.

Note that ocean pout has been managed as a zero-possession stock since 2010, and so catches are almost exclusively discards.

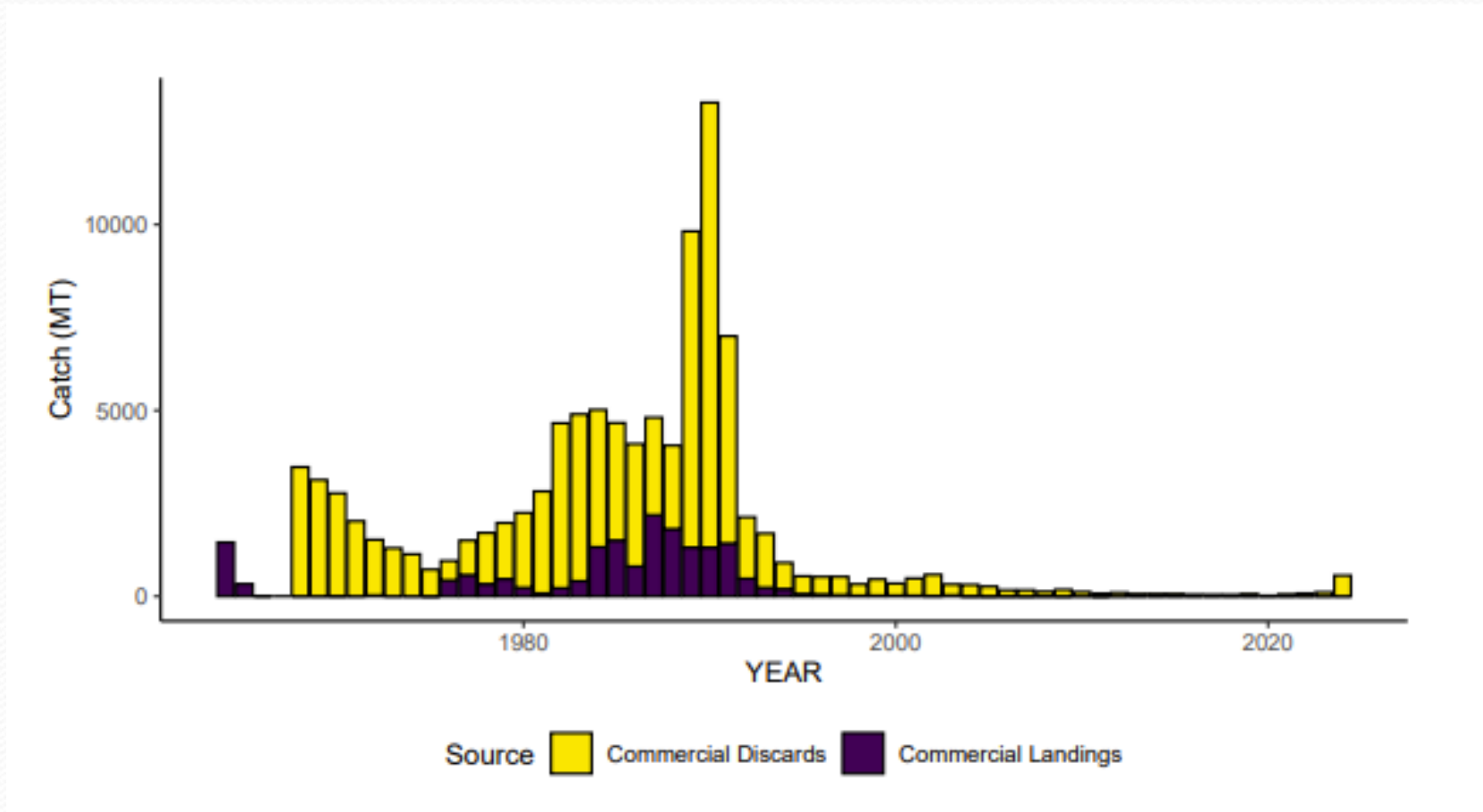
U.S. commercial ocean pout total catches (mt) from 2018 – 2024

Calendar Year	Ocean Pout Total Catch (mt)
2018	40.392
2019	64.453
2020	16.400
2021	53.717
2022	78.148
2023	109.128
2024	560.837

Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update; additional years provided in data update

- The PDT notes that fishery catches provided by the 2025 data update now include additional sources of discards in recent years (beginning in 2020) including lobster fishery discards as part of the Catch Accounting and Monitoring System (CAMS), making comparisons to past years difficult.
- Further, monitoring and catch accounting excludes lobster fishery discards presently.
- Overall, it was challenging for the PDT to interpret the updated years of fishery catch data provided in the data update.

Ocean pout landings (mt) and discards (mt) from calendar year 1964 - 2024



Landings begin in 1964 and discards begin in 1968.

Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update

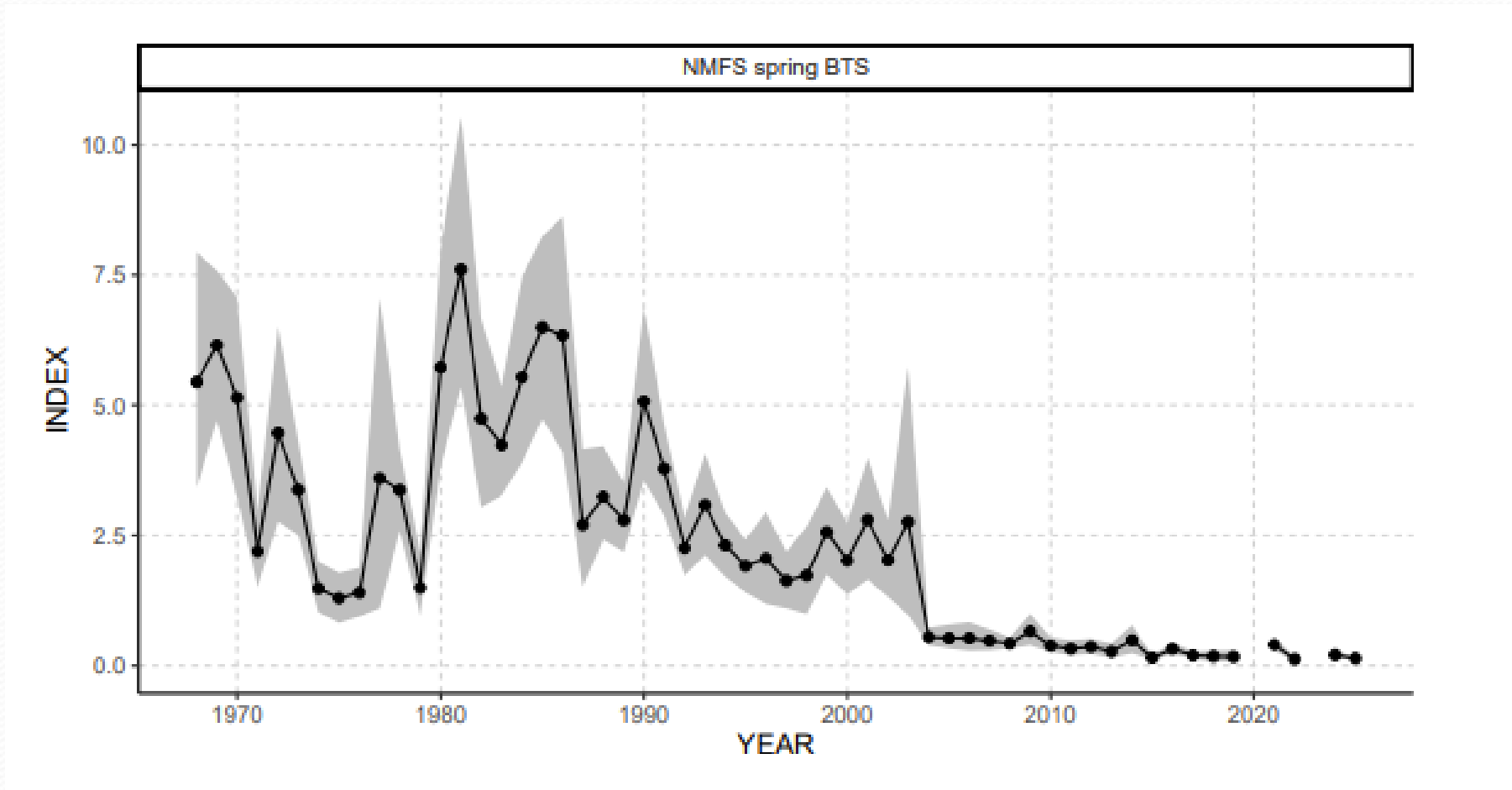
Bottom trawl survey spring index (biomass, kg/tow) of ocean pout from 2018 – 2025

Calendar Year	Ocean Pout Spring index (kg/tow)
2018	0.1798
2019	0.1696
2020	
2021	0.4008
2022	0.1252
2023	
2024	0.2053
2025	0.1384

- The spring survey index increased by ~0.08 kg/tow from 2022 to 2024 (2023 survey index is missing due to incomplete survey coverage) and decreased by ~0.067 kg/tow from 2024 to 2025.
- The spring survey index has generally been variable without a trend.

Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update; additional years provided in data update

Bottom trawl survey spring index (biomass, kg/tow) of ocean pout from 1968 - 2025



Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update

Bottom trawl stratified mean indices at length for ocean pout

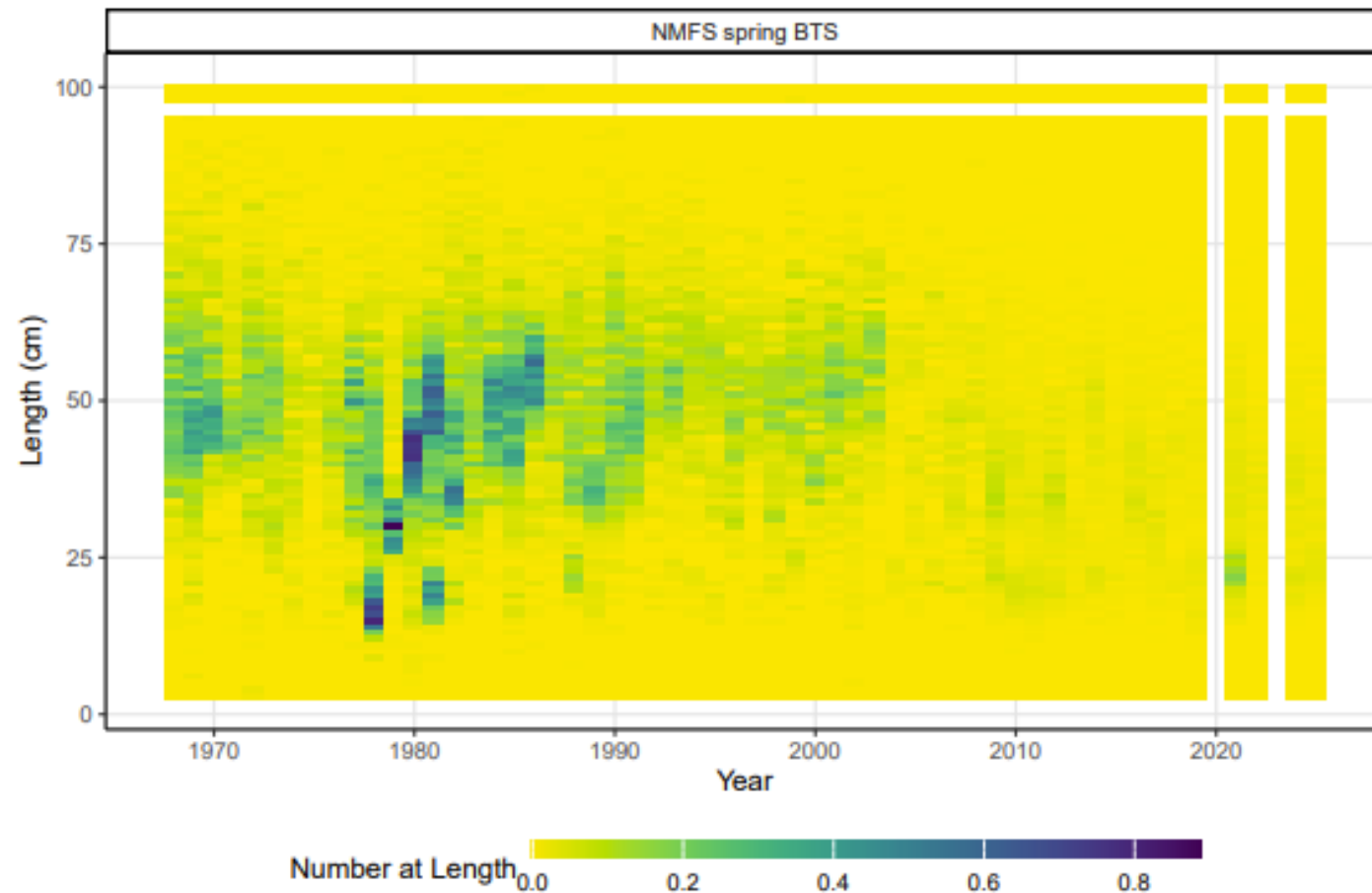


Figure 4: Stratified Mean Indices at Length for the Bottom Trawl Survey of Ocean Pout from 1968 through 2025. Survey was incomplete in Spring 2020 and Spring 2023.

Bottom trawl stratified mean indices at length for ocean pout

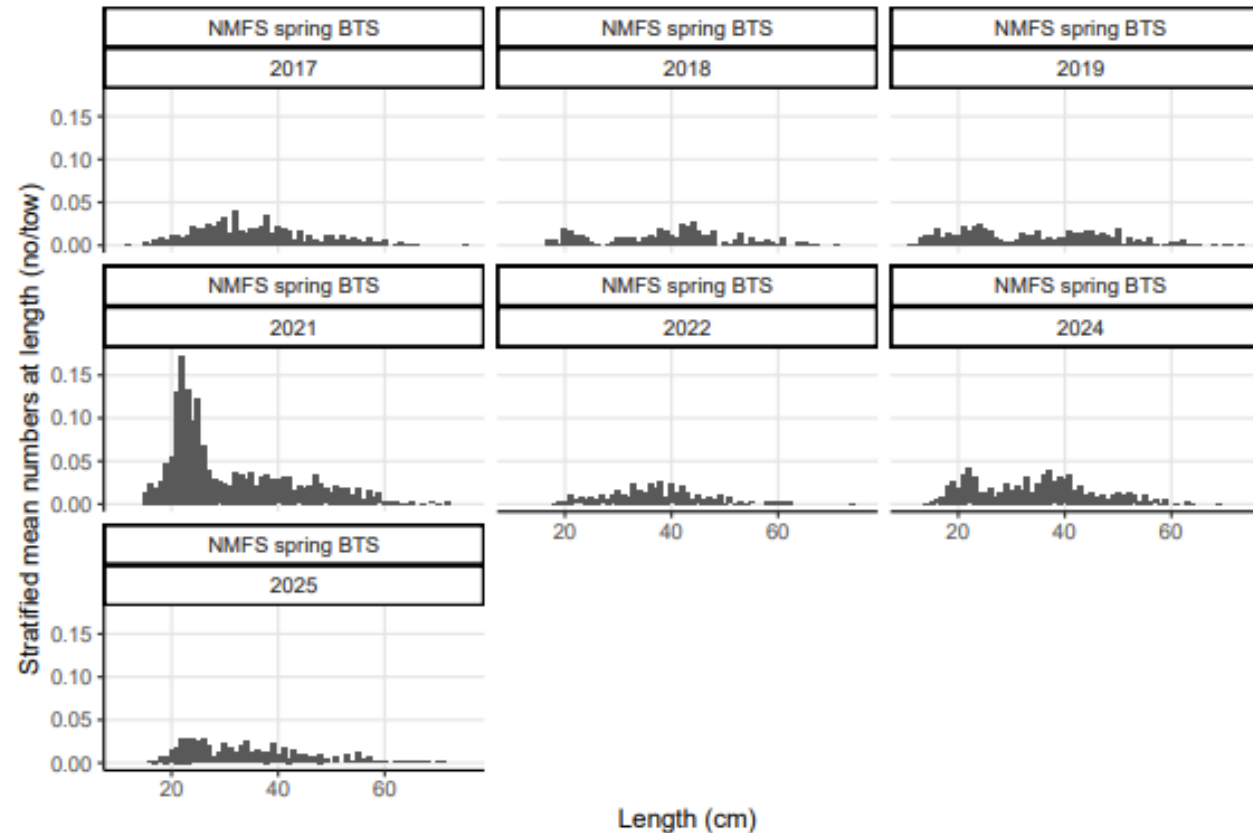


Figure 5: Stratified Mean Indices at Length for the Bottom Trawl Survey of Ocean Pout from 2017 through 2025. Survey was incomplete in Spring 2020 and Spring 2023.

Ocean Pout OFLs & ABCs for FY2026 – FY2030

Groundfish Plan Development Team



New England
Fishery Management Council

Ocean Pout

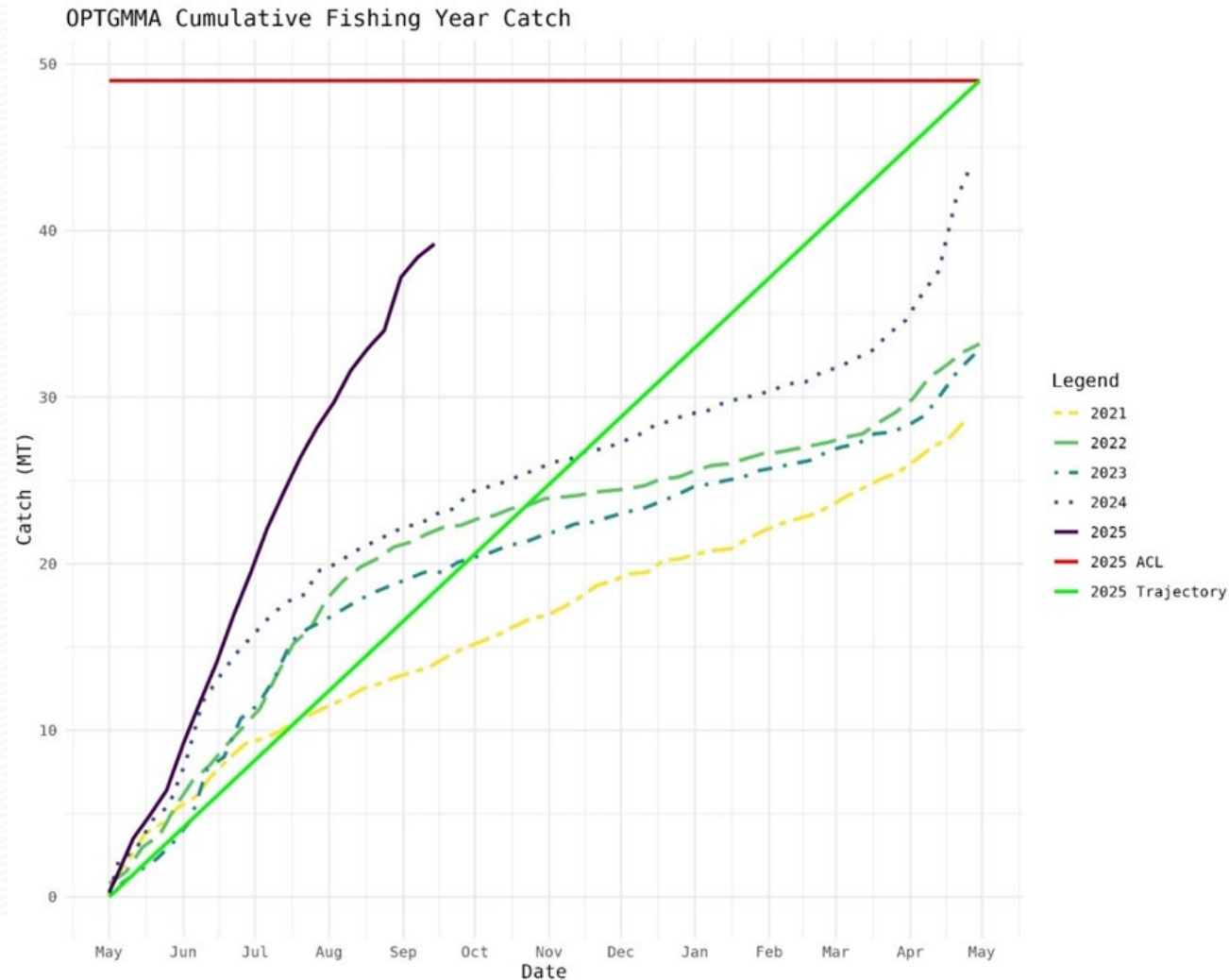


<i>MODEL</i>	Index based (exploitation ratio), Data update
<i>STOCK STATUS</i>	Overfished, Overfishing is not occurring (2022 MTA)
<i>REBUILDING</i>	2029 (70%FMSY Frebuild, no projection)
<i>RETROSPECTIVE ADJUSTMENT</i>	N/A
<i>UNCERTAINTIES</i>	No analytical assessment. Missing 2020 and 2023 survey. Data update for 2025.

2022 Management Track Assessment & FY2023-2025 Specifications

- SSC applied an alternative to the control rule by recommending status quo catch advice, carrying forward the FY2021-2023 OFLs and ABCs
 - Noted substantial uncertainty about stock status and concerns about increasing the OFL and ABC for a stock in a rebuilding plan that has not shown signs of recovery
- Considered PDT sensitivity analysis on the missing 2020 survey
- Included additional recommendations:
 - Highlighted the FMSY reference point may no longer be appropriate for the stock. Reiterated 2020 recommendation to evaluate the assessment method and basis for biological reference points in the next assessment iteration.
 - Noted that ocean pout is similar in status to other stocks that exhibit a potential change in productivity, either associated with climate or, in this case, possibly compensatory mechanisms. Recommended clarifying the appropriate assessment and management approaches for stocks in this condition.

Commercial Groundfish Fishery In-Season Catch



Ocean pout is a zero possession, non-allocated stock



Other Fisheries Sub-component Catch

- Increases of ocean pout catches in squid, squid/whiting, and fluke fisheries are consistent with trends in the groundfish fishery - driven by increases in observed bycatch in small and large-mesh otter trawl gears in the Georges Bank/Southern New England (GB_SNE) estimation region

Ocean pout discard rates for large mesh otter trawl gear on non-groundfish trips

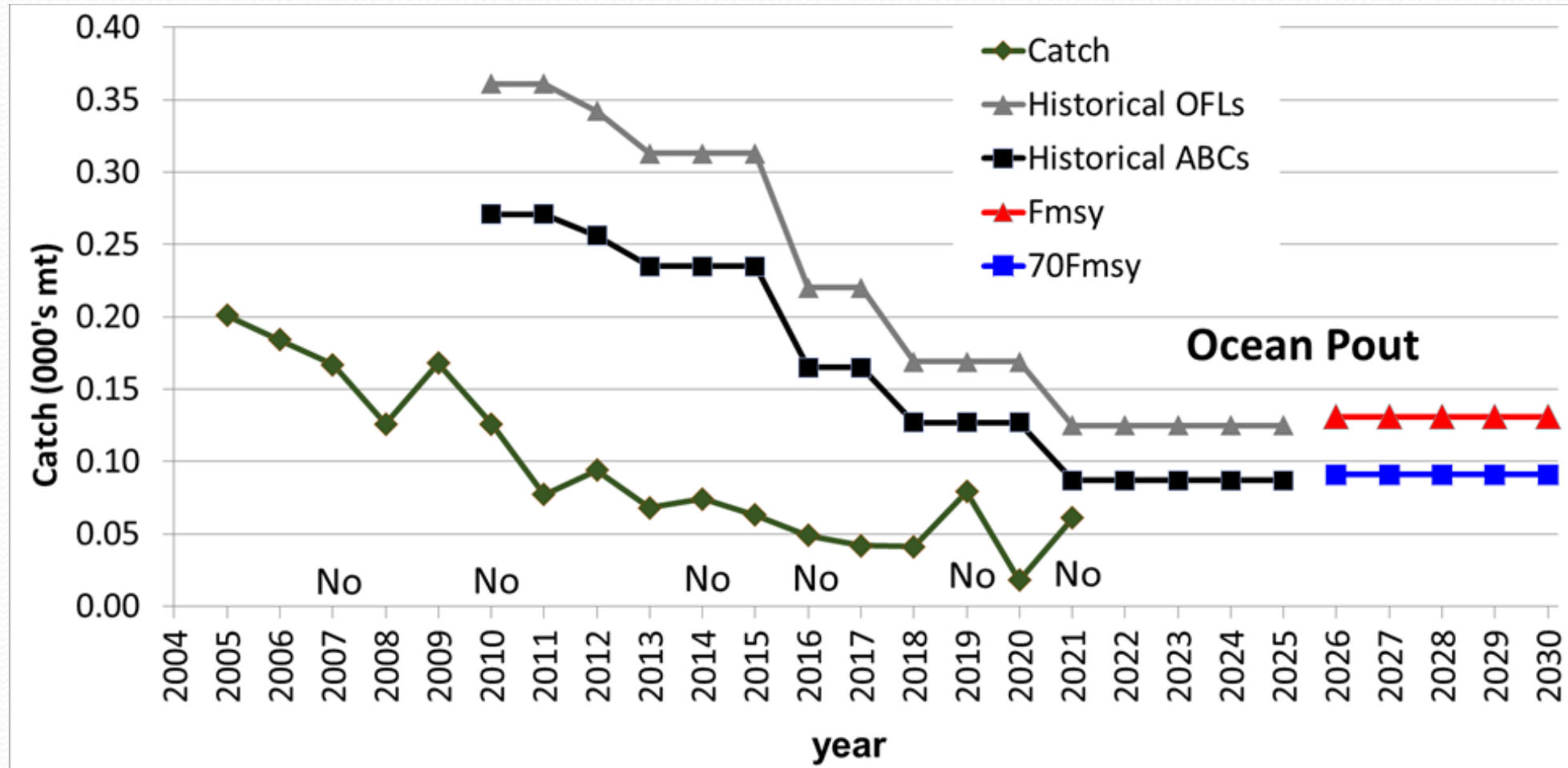
FISHING YEAR	GEAR GROUP	MESH CATEGORY	REGION	DISCARD RATE
2020	50	LM	GB_SNE	0.000122
2021	50	LM	GB_SNE	0.000147
2022	50	LM	GB_SNE	0.000799
2023	50	LM	GB_SNE	0.000292
2024	50	LM	GB_SNE	0.003134

Ocean pout discard rates for small mesh otter trawl gear on non-groundfish trips

FISHING YEAR	GEAR GROUP	MESH CATEGORY	REGION	DISCARD RATE
2020	50	SM	GB_SNE	0.000027
2021	50	SM	GB_SNE	0.000811
2022	50	SM	GB_SNE	0.000431
2023	50	SM	GB_SNE	0.000085
2024	50	SM	GB_SNE	0.001199



Catch Performance



Catch Performance

Year	Catch	Historical OFLs	Historical ABCs	F_{MSY}	$70\%F_{MSY}$
2010	126	361	271		
2011	77	361	271		
2012	94	342	256		
2013	68	313	235		
2014	74	313	235		
2015	63	313	235		
2016	49	220	165		
2017	42	220	165		
2018	41	169	127		
2019	79	169	127		
2020	18	169	127		
2021	61	125	87		
2022		125	87		
2023		125	87		
2024		125	87		
2025		125	87		
2026				131	91
2027				131	91
2028				131	91
2029					
2030					



Ocean Pout

Status quo catch advice

Fishing Year	Possible OFL (mt)	Possible ABC (mt)
2026	125	87
2027	125	87
2028	125	87
2029	125	87
2030	125	87



Ocean Pout

The 2025 data update provides the information necessary for the PDT to calculate OFLs and ABCs for ocean pout using the exploitation ratio method:

- OFL - To determine a possible OFL, usually, the 3-year recent average of the spring surveys is applied to the median exploitation ratio during 1977-1985 (76%).
 - However, the 2023 survey is missing. The PDT followed the alternative approach used in the 2022 stock assessment of using the average of the two most recent spring surveys (2024 and 2025).



Ocean Pout

2-year average (2024 & 2025) spring survey (0.17185)
applied to
median exploitation ratio during 1977-1985 ($F_{MSY} = 0.76$)
and $70\%F_{MSY} = 0.532$

Fishing Year	Possible OFL (mt)	Possible ABC (mt)
2026	131	91
2027	131	91
2028	131	91
2029	131	91
2030	131	91



Atlantic Wolffish 2025 NEFSC Data Update



New England
Fishery Management Council

2025 NEFSC Data Update

The NEFSC provided a data update in lieu of a management track assessment in 2025. This update included landings and discards through 2024 (landings beginning in 1964 and discards beginning in 1989), bottom trawl survey indices from 1963 through 2025 (biomass, kg/tow) and stratified mean indices at length (numbers/tow) for the bottom trawl survey from 1963 through 2025.

Note that wolffish has been managed as a zero-possession stock since 2010, and so catches are almost exclusively discards.

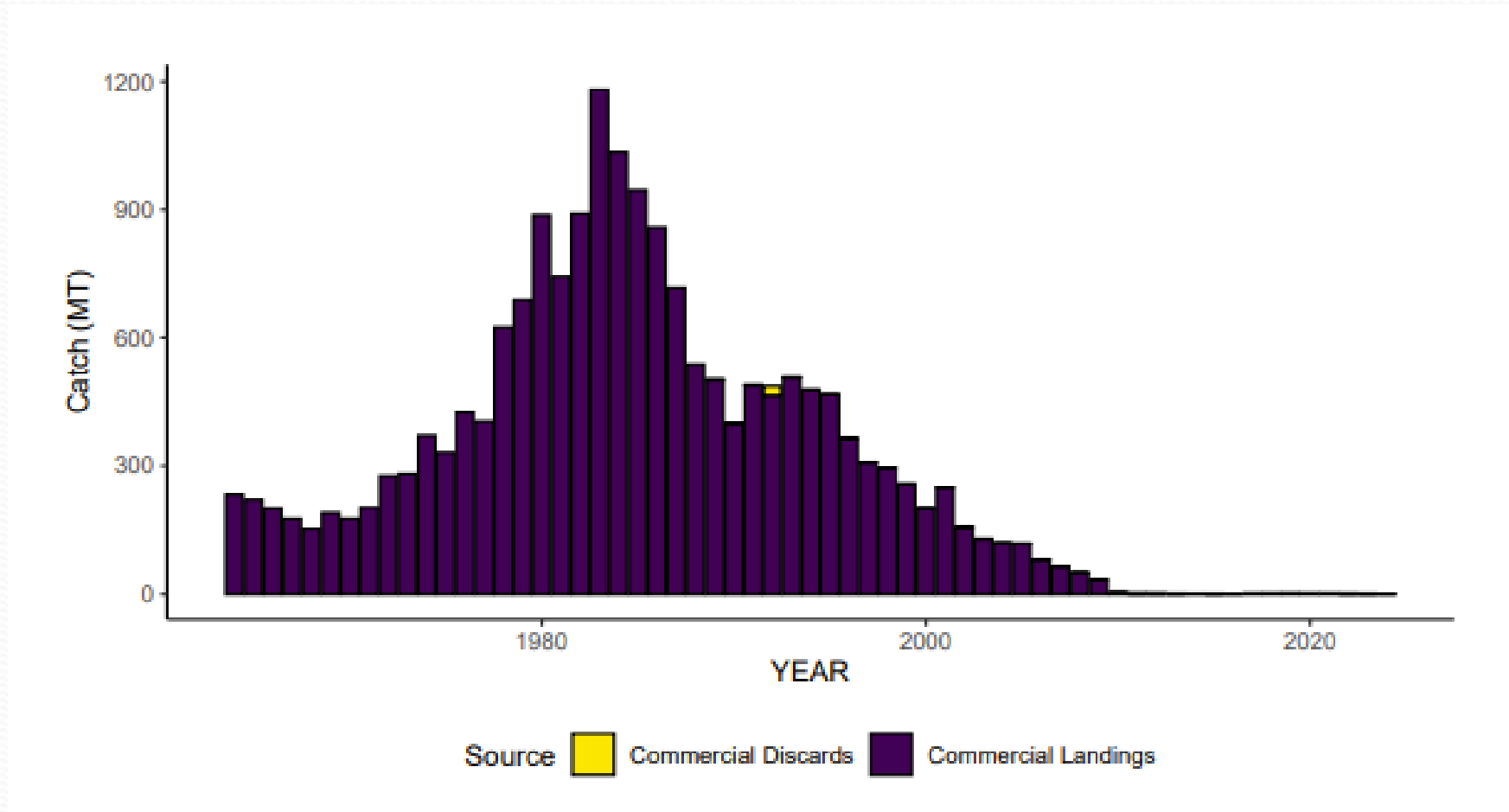
U.S. commercial Atlantic wolffish total catches (mt) from 2018 – 2024

Calendar Year	Atlantic Wolffish Total Catch (mt)
2018	2.478
2019	2.750
2020	2.430
2021	2.419
2022	2.185
2023	1.529
2024	0.810

Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update; additional years provided in data update

- Catches have remained stable at very low levels and with a decrease over 2022-2024:
 - Most recent three-year average (2022-2024) = 1.508 mt compared to previous three-year average (2019-2021) = 2.533 mt
- The PDT notes that the 2025 data update also includes additional sources of discards in the fishery catch data in recent years including from the lobster fishery. These lobster fishery discards are low and do not have much impact on total catches. This is in part due to the low discard mortality rate of 8% currently applied for Atlantic wolffish.

Wolffish landings (mt) and discards (mt) from calendar year 1964 - 2024



Landings begin in 1964 and discards begin in 1989.

Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update

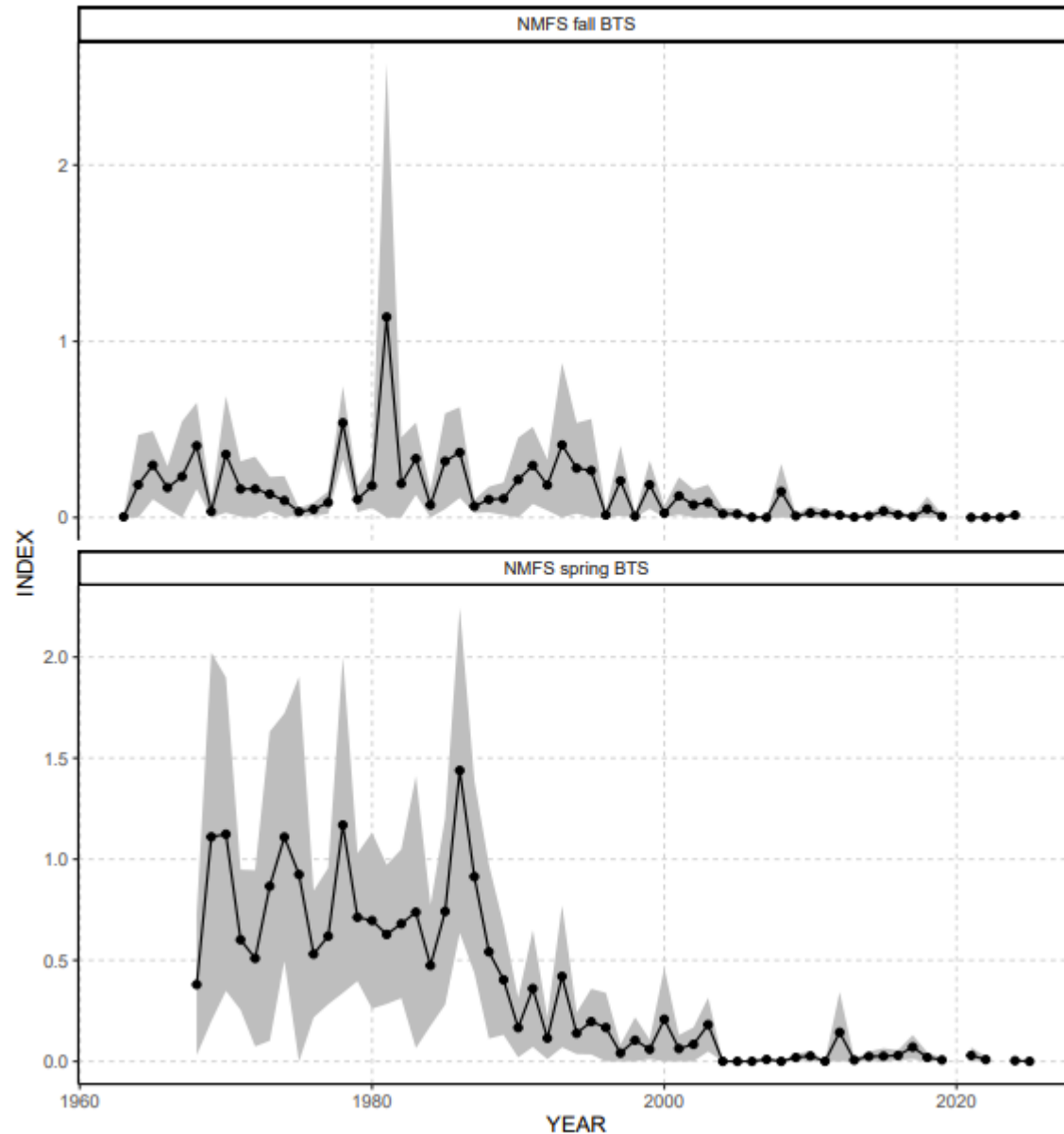
Bottom trawl survey index (biomass, kg/tow) of wolffish from 2018 – 2025

Calendar Year	Atlantic Wolffish	
	Spring index (kg/tow)	Fall index (kg/tow)
2018	0.019224	0.048877
2019	0.006808	0.006469
2020		
2021	0.029475	0
2022	0.008824	0.001011
2023		0
2024	0.003409	0.013282
2025	0.000011	

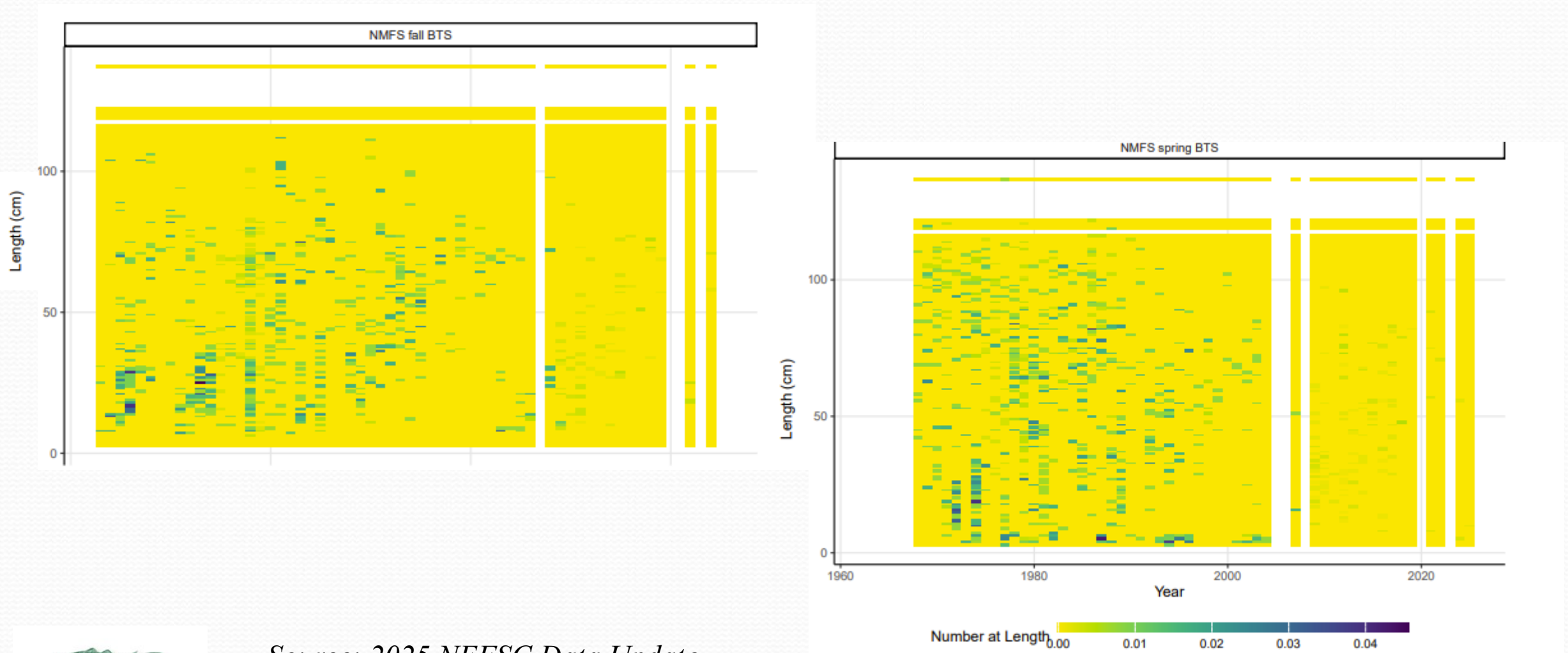
- The spring survey index decreased by ~ 0.008813 kg/tow across 2022 to 2025 (2023 survey missing).
- The fall survey index decreased slightly by ~0.001011 kg/tow from 2022 to 2023 by and increased slightly by ~0.013282 kg/tow from 2023 to 2024.
- In general, both the spring and fall indices are very low, with zeros in two recent fall index years.

Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update; additional years provided in data update

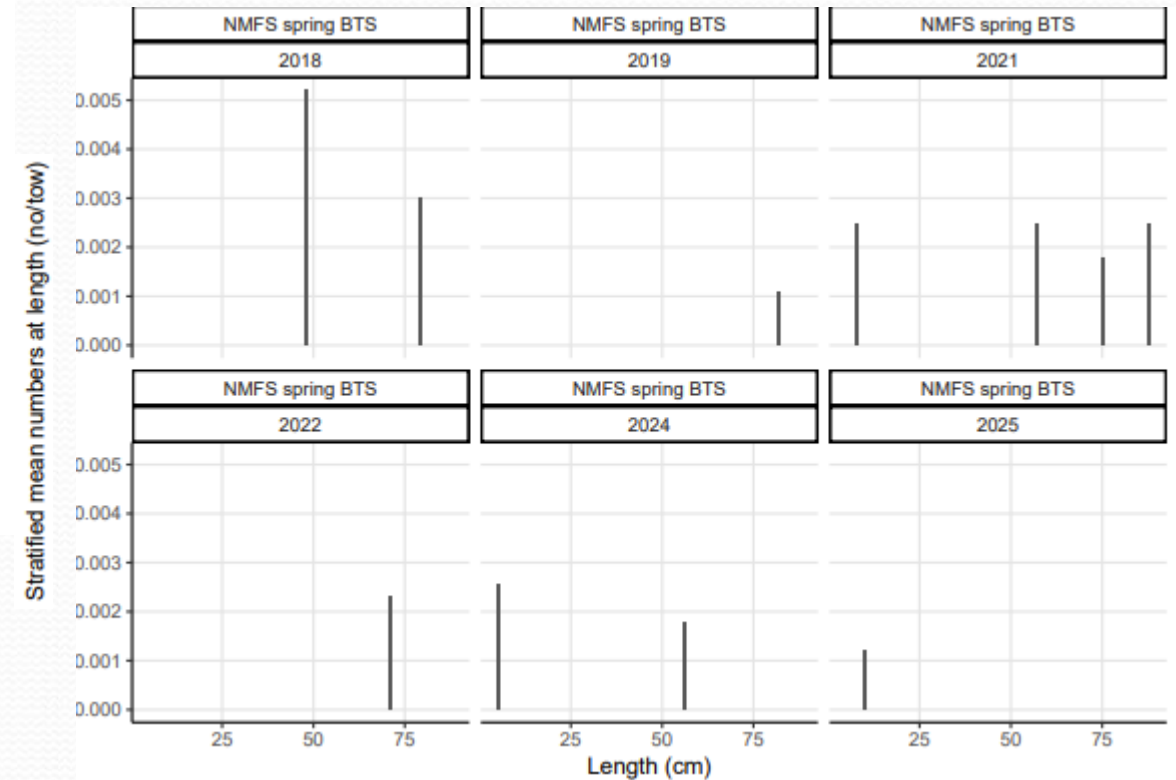
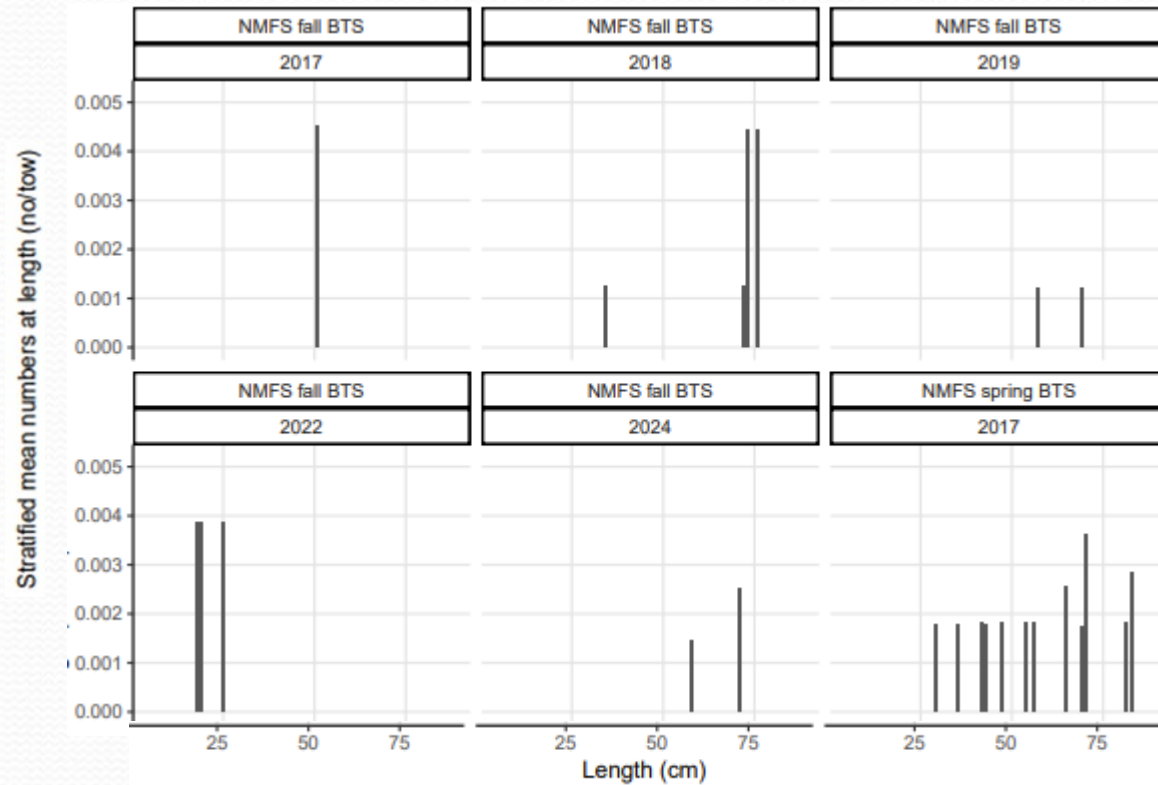
Bottom trawl survey fall and spring index (biomass, kg/tow) of wolffish from 1963 - 2025



Bottom trawl stratified mean indices at length for wolffish



Bottom trawl stratified mean indices at length for wolffish



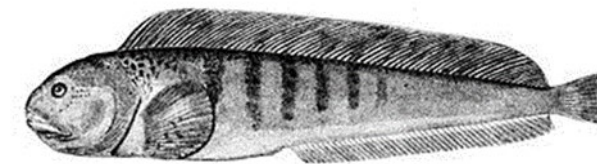
Atlantic Wolffish OFLs & ABCs for FY2026 – FY2030

Groundfish Plan Development Team



New England
Fishery Management Council

Atlantic Wolffish



<i>MODEL</i>	SCALE, Data update
<i>STOCK STATUS</i>	Overfished, Overfishing is not occurring (2022 MTA)
<i>REBUILDING</i>	Undefined
<i>RETROSPECTIVE ADJUSTMENT</i>	N/A
<i>UNCERTAINTIES</i>	Uncertainty with regards to 8% discard mortality rate. Low detection in the NEFSC surveys. Ocean Pout Bigelow conversion. Missing surveys in 2020 and spring 2023. Data update for 2025.

2022 Management Track Assessment & FY2023-2025 Specifications

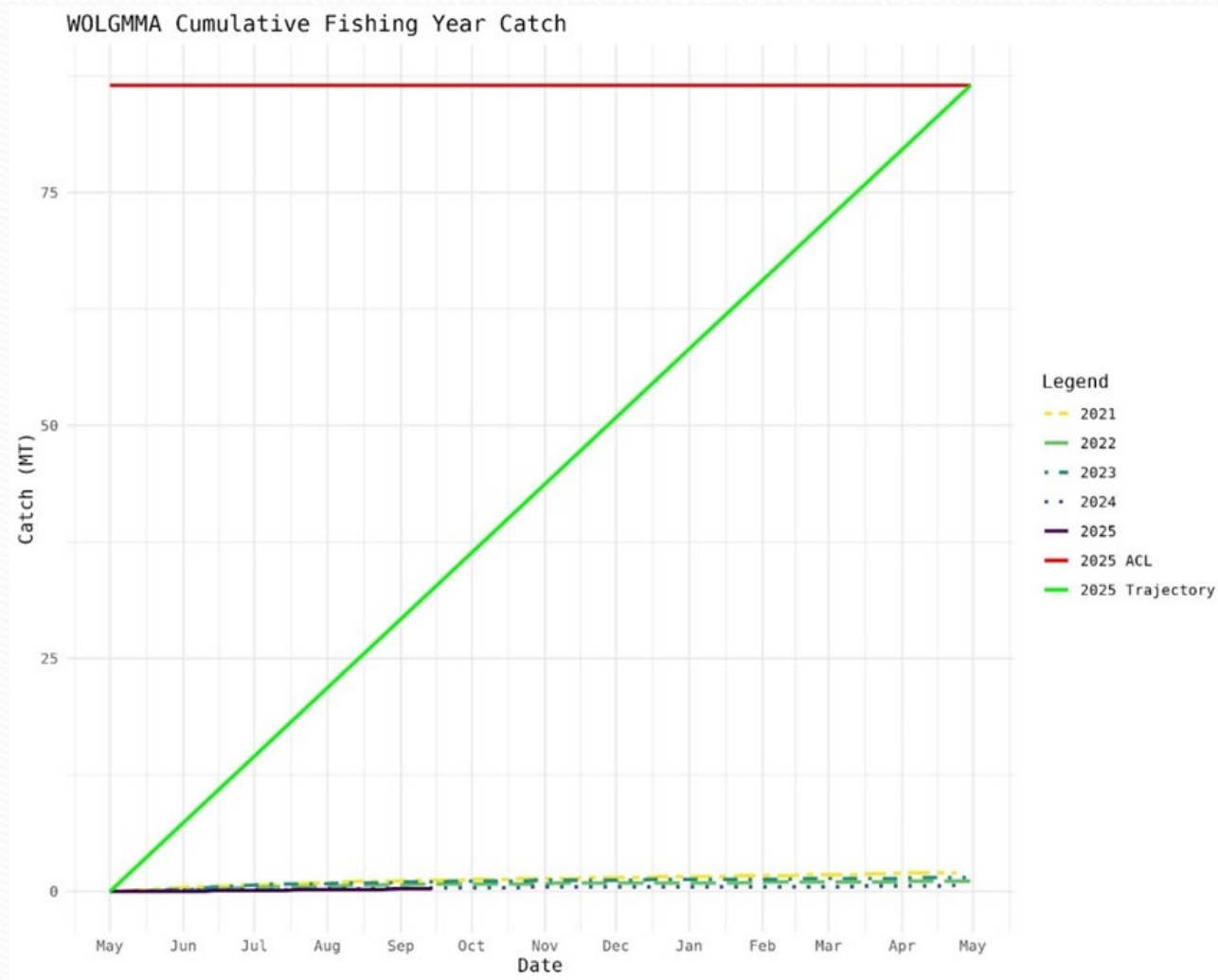
- SSC applied Option 1 of the ABC control rule:

$OFL = F_{MSY} \times \text{terminal year exploitable biomass (644 mt)}$

$ABC = 75\%F_{MSY} \times \text{terminal year exploitable biomass}$

- Considered PDT sensitivity analysis which calculated ABCs across a range from 50-75% F_{MSY}
- Included several recommendations:
 - Exploration of the impact and alternative treatment of missing survey data.
 - Exploration of additional survey methods for wolffish (i.e., longline surveys) and alternative indices of abundance (i.e., wolffish bycatch in the lobster fishery).
 - Recognition of the possibility that despite the low removals of wolffish, the stock may be driven primarily by environmental factors.

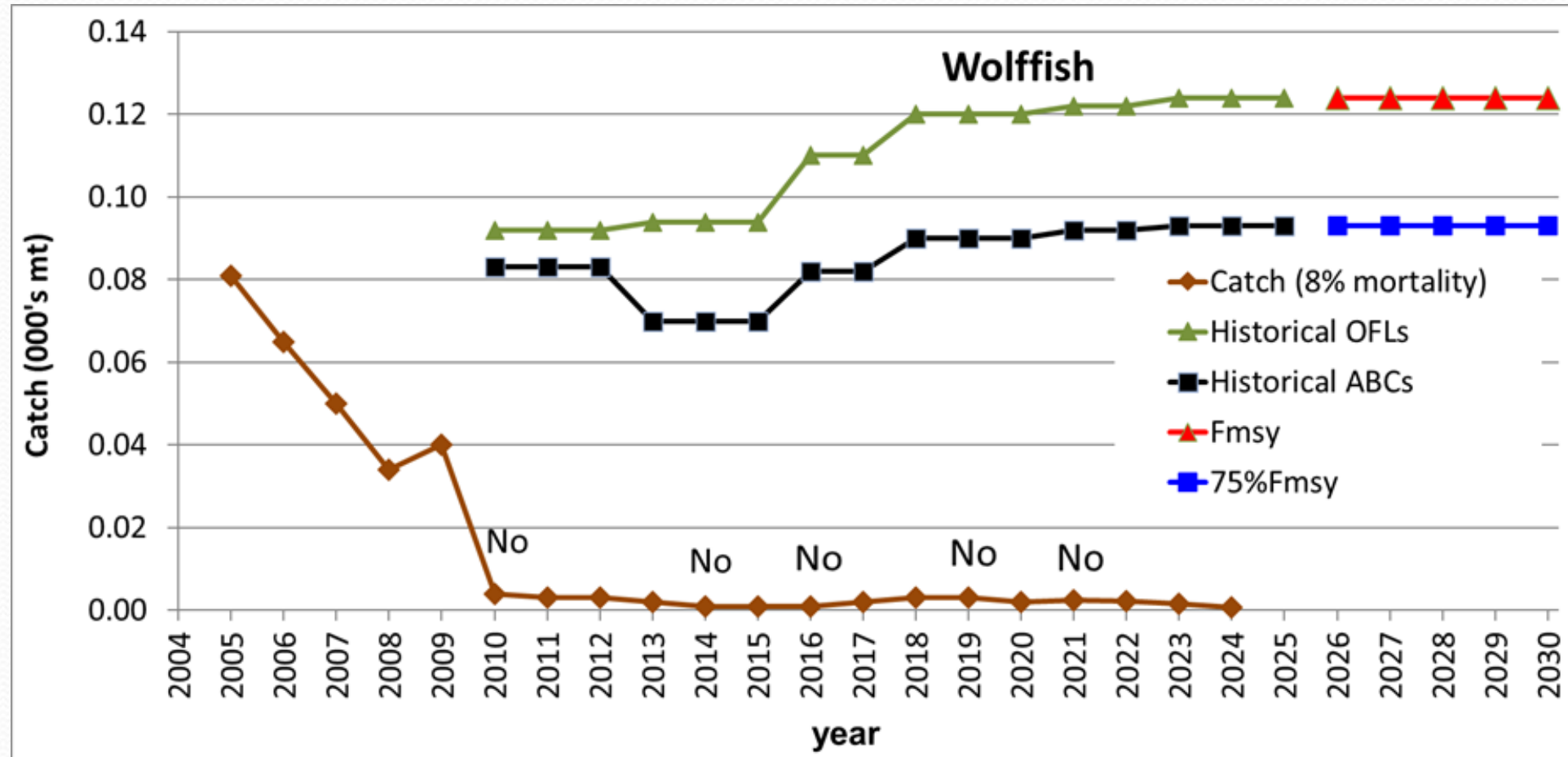
Commercial Groundfish Fishery In-Season Catch



Wolffish is a zero possession, non-allocated stock



Catch Performance



Catch Performance

Year	Catch	Historical OFLs	Historical ABCs	F_{MSY}	$75\%F_{MSY}$
2010	4	92	83		
2011	3	92	83		
2012	3	92	83		
2013	2	94	70		
2014	1	94	70		
2015	1	94	70		
2016	1	110	82		
2017	2	110	82		
2018	3	120	90		
2019	3	120	90		
2020	2	120	90		
2021	2	122	92		
2022	2	122	92		
2023	2	124	93		
2024	1	124	93		
2025		124	93		
2026				124	93
2027				124	93
2028				124	93
2029				124	93
2030				124	93



Atlantic Wolffish

Status quo catch advice

Fishing Year	Possible OFL (mt)	Possible ABC (mt)
2026	124	93
2027	124	93
2028	124	93
2029	124	93
2030	124	93

