New England Fishery Management Council
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MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 1, 2025

TO: Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC)

CC: Groundfish Committee

FROM: Groundfish Plan Development Team

SUBJECT: **Possible overfishing limits (OFLs) and acceptable biological catches (ABCs) for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish, fishing years (FY) 2026 through 2030**

The Groundfish Plan Development Team (PDT) met on September 29, 2025, by webinar to discuss the 2025 data updates and develop possible overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) options for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish.

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. The PDT provides possible OFLs and ABCs for FY2026-2030 for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish.

Overview

In general, the PDT applies the Council's current ABC control rule for groundfish stocks (see Amendment 16) to provide catch advice options for the SSC's consideration:

The 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*

However, 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. Recognizing this is the first iteration of data updates for groundfish stocks and the Council is awaiting further guidance on how data updates would be used to change catch advice from existing ABCs, the PDT discussed updated survey biomass and fishery catch data in the 2025 data updates in context with the 2022 management track assessments and resulting specifications, to consider whether maintaining status quo catch advice is appropriate, including noting uncertainties.

To develop recommendations, the PDT reviewed the 2025 data updates provided by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) and the 2022 management track assessment and specification setting information (stock assessment, SSC report, and PDT report) for ocean pout and Atlantic wolffish.

Summary by Groundfish Stock

For each stock, this memo provides a brief overview of the last management track assessment (2022 Management Track Assessment and FY2023-2025 specifications), summarizes the 2025 NEFSC data update, summarizes stock status and rebuilding plan, provides fishery performance information, and provides possible OFLs and ABCs for SSC consideration for FY2026-2030.

1. Ocean pout

Information Reviewed:
Information the PDT reviewed included: the 2025 NEFSC data update, the 2022 stock assessment, SSC reports, PDT reports, and catch information.

2022 Management Track Assessment and Fishing Years 2023-2025 Specifications:
The 2022 stock assessment determined:

- SSB_{MSY} = 4.94 kg/tow
- MSY = 3,754 mt
- F_{MSY} proxy = 0.76
- The biomass proxy in 2021 was estimated to be 0.263 kg/tow which is 5% of the biomass target.
- The 2021 fully selected fishing mortality was estimated to be 0.234 which is 31% of the overfishing threshold proxy.

The main source of uncertainty in the 2022 assessment was the missing 2020 survey, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The assessment applied the exploitation ratio to the average of the most recent two survey years available (versus three years as the standard approach). The PDT provided a sensitivity that used the most recent three survey years available (2019, 2021, and

2022).[1] This results in lower catch advice than using the assessment method, with both being an increase from the OFL and ABC at that time.

The SSC 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, and chose to follow an alternative approach by recommending status quo catch advice, carrying forward the FY2021-2023 OFLs and ABCs.[2] The SSC provided the following as rationale:

> "*The SSC considered the economic, social, and ecological trade-offs of the proposed OFL and ABC values and noted that ecological risks outweigh economic risks for this zero-possession stock. The SSC highlighted that stability is intended to avoid abrupt shifts in fisheries management, to the extent possible, and that in the case of ocean pout, there is no strong scientific justification for increasing OFL and ABC due to high levels of uncertainty. The SSC recommends deviating from ABC control rule Option 2 due to substantial uncertainty in stock status, missing survey data impacts on the assessment, concern about the magnitude of increase in advice resulting from application of Frebuild for a stock that is not rebuilding, and a potentially inappropriate F_{MSY} reference point. The SSC believes that the recommended ABC is unlikely to result in overfishing for this stock.*"

The SSC provided additional recommendations:

- The SSC highlighted that the F_{MSY} reference point may no longer be appropriate for the stock. The SSC reiterated its 2020 recommendation to evaluate the assessment method and basis for biological reference points in the next assessment iteration.
- The SSC 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 depensatory mechanisms. The SSC recommended that clarifying the appropriate assessment and management approaches for this and other similar stocks is critical.

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.

Total catches for the most recent calendar years are provided in Table 1. 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.

[1] See "221007 Groundfish PDT memo to SSC re witch flounder, ocean pout, and wolffish": https://d23h0vhsm26o6d.cloudfront.net/6_221007-GF-PDT-memo-to-SSC-re-witch-flounder-ocean-pout-wolffish.pdf

[2] See "221123 SSC Report re Groundfish Stocks": https://d23h0vhsm26o6d.cloudfront.net/4.-SSC-Groundfish-Report-2022-11_23_22.pdf

Table 1 - U.S. commercial ocean pout total catches (mt) from 2018 – 2024. Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update.

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

NMFS spring survey indices are provided for the most recent calendar years in Table 2. 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.

The 2025 data update also provided stratified mean indices at length per tow from the bottom trawl survey. The PDT found the figures challenging to interpret without additional information, but that overall these mean indices at length did not appear to be informative for ocean pout.

Table 2- Bottom trawl survey spring index (biomass, kg/tow) of ocean pout from 2018 – 2025. Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update.

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

Stock Status and Rebuilding Plan:

Based on the 2022 stock assessment report, ocean pout is overfished, and overfishing is not occurring. Ocean pout is in a rebuilding plan with a rebuild by date of 2029. The Council has managed ocean pout as a non-allocated discard-only stock, since 2010. Therefore, catch that does occur is considered bycatch. The 2022 assessment noted that despite 20 years with realized fishing mortality rates below the F_{MSY} proxy, ocean pout biomass has continued to decline and remains near historic lows in the time series.

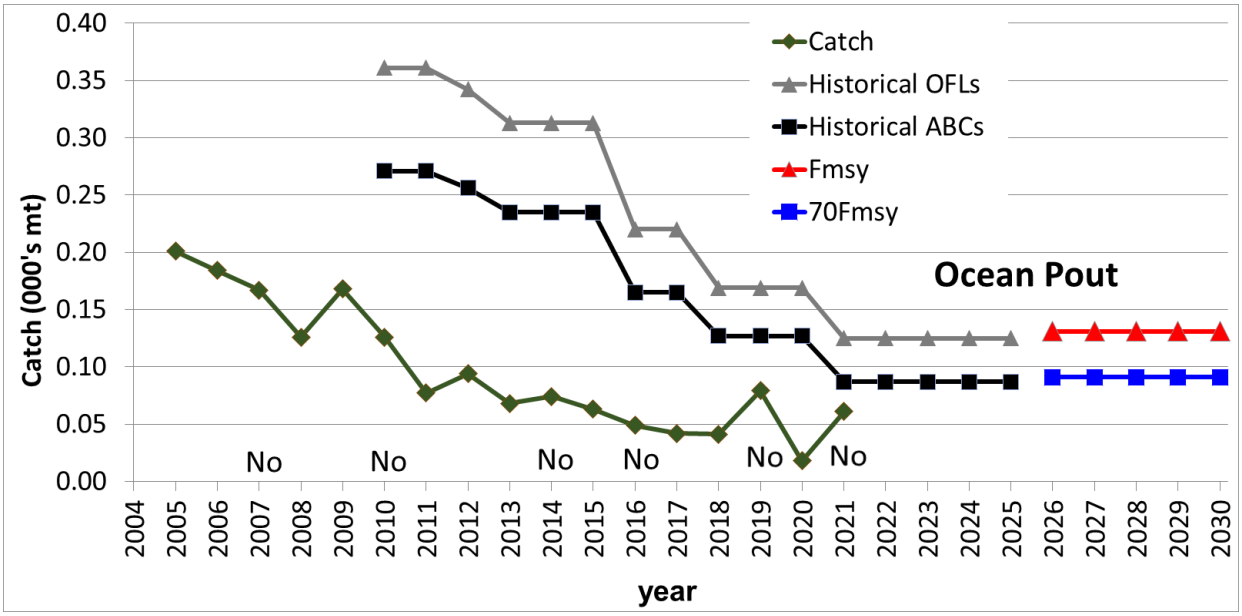
Catch Performance:

Table 3 and Figure 1 summarize catch performance and changes in overfishing status for ocean pout. Note the catch has not been updated for recent years, given the discrepancy described above with recent years of fishery catch data in the 2025 data update including additional sources of discards.

Table 3- Catch performance (CY2010-CY2021), historical OFLs and ABCs (FY2010-FY2025), and using a constant OFL and ABC approach (FY2026-FY2030) for ocean pout.

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					

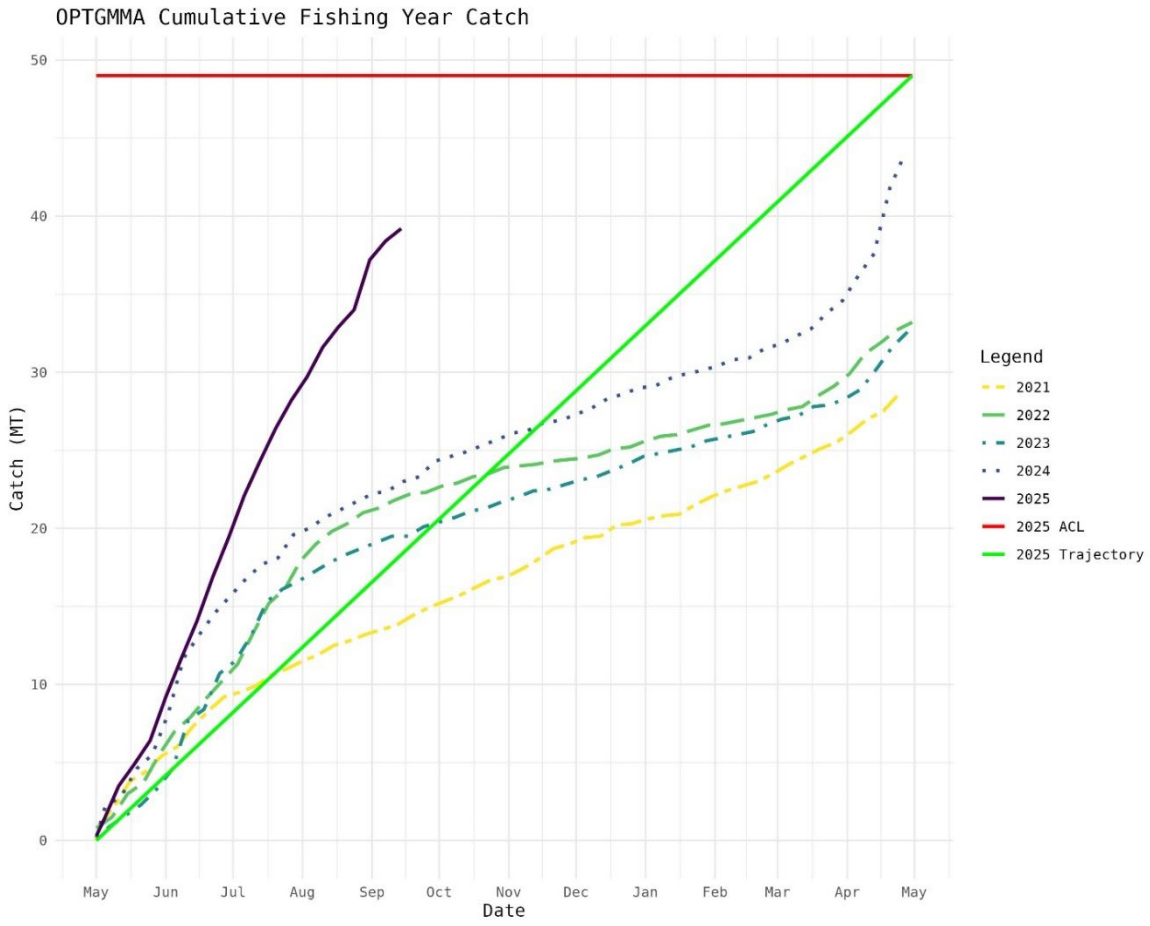
Figure 1- Catch performance for ocean pout including: catches from CY2005-CY2021, historical OFLs and ABCs since FY2010, and FY2026-FY2030 constant OFLs and ABCs. Overfishing status in the terminal year of the assessment indicated on the x-axis ("No" = not overfishing).



Additional Fishery Information:

Commercial Fishery – Figure 2 shows commercial groundfish (sector and common pool) catch of ocean pout since FY2021 along with the FY2025 commercial annual catch limit (ACL). Ocean pout is a zero possession, non-allocated stock, so catches are nearly entirely discards and any catch that does occur is considered bycatch. Catch and utilization by the commercial groundfish fishery have been increasing over time. The sector component of the commercial groundfish fishery has had high levels of monitoring coverage in recent years with target monitoring coverage of 100%. In-season 2025 catch is uncertain and the PDT has seen a similar trend early in the fishing year that was later updated with more information.

Figure 2- In-season utilization of ocean pout by the commercial (sectors and common pool) groundfish fishery.



Other Fisheries Sub-component - Increases of ocean pout catches in squid, squid/whiting, and fluke fisheries are consistent with trends in the groundfish fishery, and are 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 (Table 4 and Table 5).

Table 4- 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

Table 5- 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

Possible OFLs and ABCs:

In the absence of further guidance on how data updates would be used to change catch advice from existing ABCs, the PDT provides status quo OFLs and ABCs for consideration (Table 6). Status quo OFLs and ABCs have been in place for the past five fishing years (FY 2021-2025), which were recommended by the SSC. The PDT notes the updated survey indices in the data update do not show substantial changes in recent years. Updated fishery catches show increases in recent years for the commercial groundfish fishery and other fishery components. The 2025 data update provides the information necessary for the PDT to calculate OFLs and ABCs for ocean pout using the exploitation ratio method, which is provided as an additional option (Table 7).

- 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, as delays in the survey schedule resulted in incomplete coverage. In the 2022 stock assessment, an alternative approach was applied using the average of the two most recent spring surveys. The PDT follows that same approach and applies the average (0.17185) of the two most recent spring surveys available:
        - Year 1: Spring 2024
        - Year 2: Spring 2025
    - Possible OFL = 0.17185*0.76*1,000 = 131 mt

- ABC - To determine a possible ABC, $F_{rebuild}$ is $70\%F_{MSY}$ = 0.76 * 0.7 = 0.532.
    - Possible ABC = 0.17185*0.532*1,000 = 91 mt

Catch projections are not possible for this stock. The PDT applies a constant approach for OFLs and ABCs.

Table 6- Possible OFLs and ABCs (mt) for FY2026- FY2030 for ocean pout, following status quo catch advice, using a constant approach for five years.

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

Table 7- Possible OFLs and ABCs (mt) for FY2026- FY2030 for ocean pout, following the updated assessment method calculation, using a constant approach for five years.

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

2. Atlantic wolffish

Information Reviewed:
Information the PDT reviewed included: the 2025 NEFSC data update, the 2022 stock assessment, SSC reports, PDT reports, and catch information.

2022 Management Track Assessment and Fishing Years 2023-2025 Specifications:
The 2022 stock assessment determined:

- SSB_{MSY} = 1,509 mt
- MSY = 211 mt
- F_{MSY} proxy = 0.192
- SSB in 2021 was estimated to be 690 mt which is 46% of the biomass target.
- The 2021 fully selected fishing mortality was estimated to be 0.004 which is 2% of the overfishing threshold proxy.

- The terminal year 2021 exploitable biomass is 644 mt.

- OFL = F_{MSY} * terminal year exploitable biomass
    - Possible OFL = 0.192*644 = 124 mt

- ABC = 75%F_{MSY} * terminal year exploitable biomass.
    - Possible ABC = 0.75 * 0.192 * 644 = 93 mt

Given the uncertainties regarding the wolffish stock assessment (low detection in the surveys, low assumed discard mortality), the PDT had discussed whether 75%F_{MSY} is still an appropriate basis for an ABC for this stock, noting this is difficult though, as wolffish does not appear to be responding to low removals and stock conditions could be driven by environmental factors. The PDT provided a table for discussion which summarizes the calculation of ABCs as various F

rates as a sensitivity, if the SSC chose to consider an ABC lower than 75%F_{MSY}[3]. The PDT also discussed plans for the 2025 management track assessment to include a new evaluation of the assumed discard mortality rate and potentially incorporate the NMFS bottom long-line survey, both of which did not occur given a data update was provided instead.

The SSC applied Option 1 of the ABC control rule, and considered the PDT sensitivity analysis which calculated ABCs across a range from 50-75% F_{MSY}. The SSC noted primary sources of uncertainty in the wolffish assessment are the use of the ocean pout research vessel survey catch calibration coefficient to standardize Albatross and Bigelow survey catches (i.e., wolffish calibration coefficients are unknown), and the change to a no possession catch limit in May 2010. It is also unclear whether the lack of a recruitment index since 2005 is due to an actual decrease in recruitment or a change in survey catchability resulting from the increase in liner mesh size associated with the switch to the Bigelow as the survey vessel. Additionally, the surveys may have reached the limit of wolffish detectability due to the decline in stock abundance, or the ineffectiveness of the stratified random sampling design to sample current wolffish habitats.

The SSC 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. While annual ABCs have ranged between 70 and 92 mt during 2010-2021, catches of wolffish have only been between 1 and 6 mt in these years. Studies on the effects and impacts of environmental factors on wolffish survival and reproduction would be extremely informative.

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 for the bottom trawl survey from 1963 through 2025. Note that Atlantic wolffish has been managed as a zero-possession stock since 2010, and so catches are almost exclusively discards.

Total catches for the most recent calendar years are provided in Table 8. 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 for Atlantic wolffish 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.

[3] See "221007 Groundfish PDT memo to SSC re witch flounder, ocean pout, and wolffish": https://d23h0vhsm26o6d.cloudfront.net/6_221007-GF-PDT-memo-to-SSC-re-witch-flounder-ocean-pout-wolffish.pdf

Table 8- U.S. commercial Atlantic wolffish total catches (mt) from 2018 – 2024. Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update.

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

NMFS spring and fall survey indices are provided for the most recent calendar years in Table 9. 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.

The 2025 data update also provided stratified mean indices at length per tow from the bottom trawl survey. As with ocean pout, the PDT found the figures challenging to interpret without additional information, and that overall these mean indices at length did not appear to be informative for wolffish.

Table 9- Bottom trawl survey spring and fall index (biomass, kg/tow) of Atlantic wolffish from 2018 – 2025. Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update.

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	

Stock Status and Rebuilding Plan:

Based on the 2022 stock assessment report, Atlantic wolffish is overfished, and overfishing is not occurring. Atlantic wolffish is in a rebuilding plan with an undefined rebuilding date. The Council has managed wolffish as a non-allocated discard-only stock, since 2010. Therefore, catch that does occur is considered bycatch. However, as was noted during the 2022 assessment, the stock has not responded to low catches and it is possible the stock is driven primarily by environmental conditions.

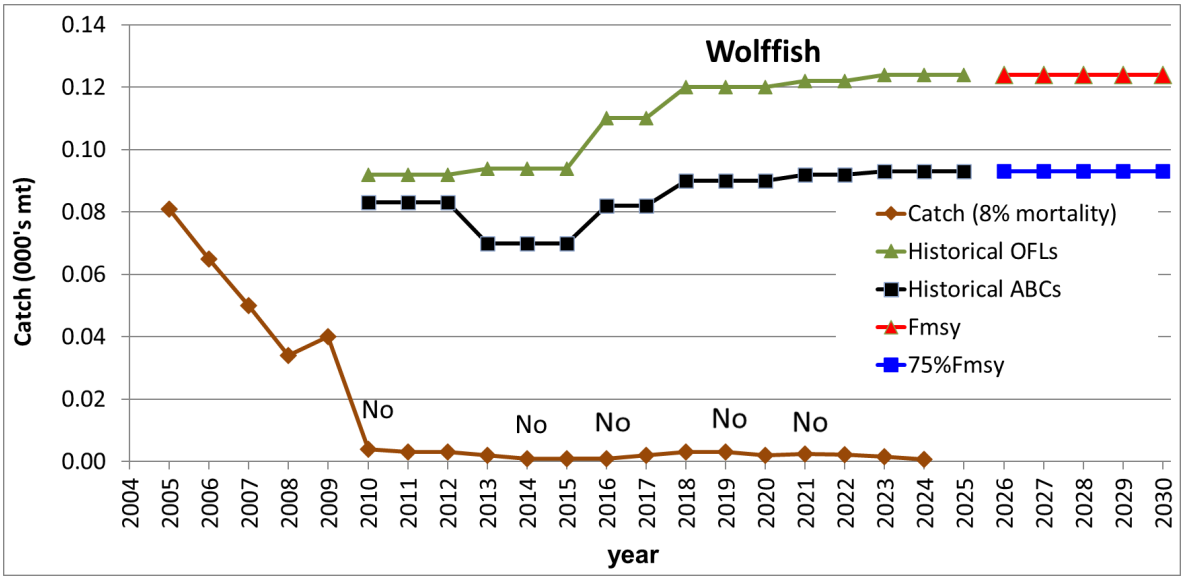
Catch Performance:

Table 10 and Figure 3 summarize catch performance and changes in overfishing status for Atlantic wolffish.

Table 10- Catch performance (CY2010-CY2024), historical OFLs and ABCs (FY2010-FY2025), and using a constant OFL and ABC approach (FY2026-FY2030) for Atlantic wolffish.

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

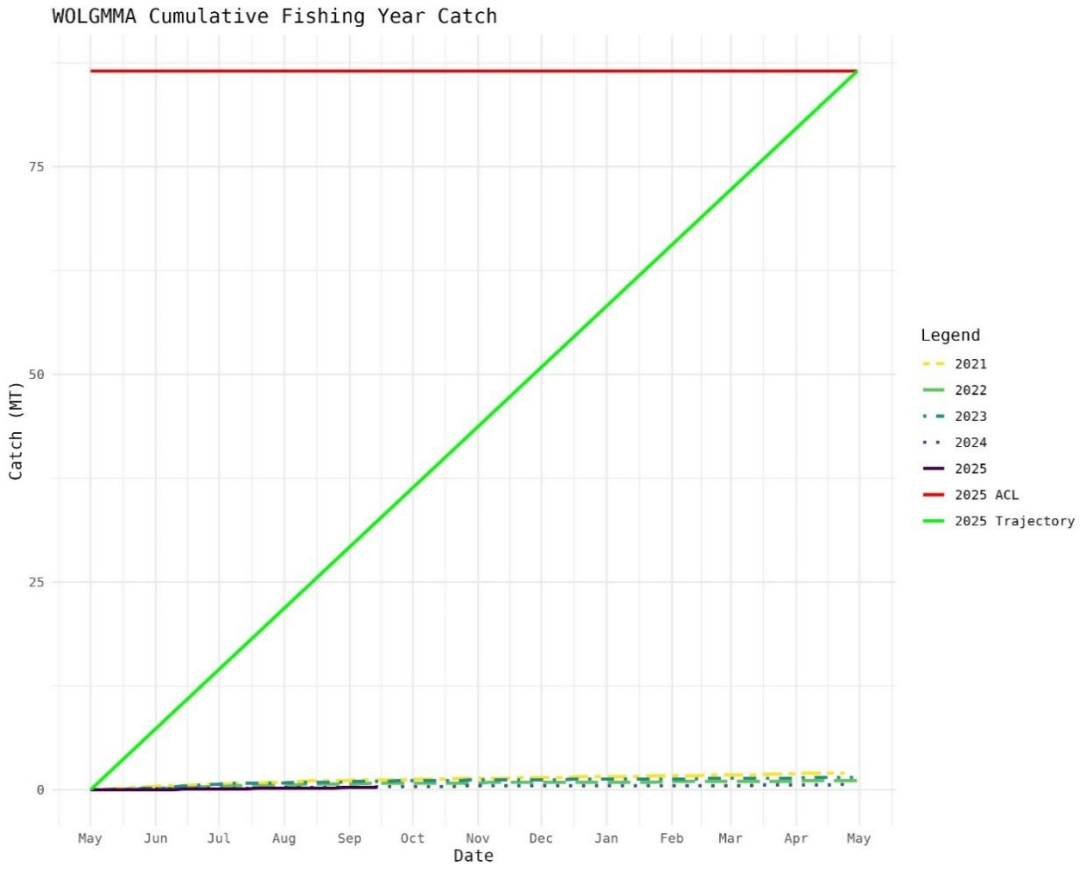
Figure 3- Catch performance for Atlantic wolffish including: catches from CY2005-CY2024, historical OFLs and ABCs since FY2010, and FY2026-FY2030 constant OFLs and ABCs. Overfishing status in the terminal year of the assessment indicated on the x-axis ("No" = not overfishing).



Additional Fishery Information:

Commercial Fishery – Figure 4 shows commercial groundfish (sector and common pool) catch of ocean pout since FY2021 along with the FY2025 commercial annual catch limits (ACL). Atlantic wolffish is a zero possession, non-allocated stock, so catches are nearly entirely discards and any catch that does occur is considered bycatch. Utilization by the groundfish fishery has been very low.

Figure 4- In-season utilization of Atlantic wolffish by the commercial (sectors and common pool) groundfish fishery.



Possible OFLs and ABCs:

In the absence of further guidance on how data updates would be used to change catch advice from existing ABCs, the PDT provides status quo OFLs and ABCs for consideration (Table 11). Status quo OFLs and ABCs have been in place for the past three fishing years (FY2023-2025), which were recommended by the SSC, and there are no substantial changes to the catch and survey indices in the data update. Catches continue to remain very low and well below the ABCs.

Catch projections are not possible for this stock. The PDT applies a constant approach for OFLs and ABCs.

Table 11- Possible OFLs and ABCs (mt) for FY2026- FY2030 for Atlantic wolffish, following status quo catch advice, using a constant approach for five years.

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