



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 30, 2026
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 northern windowpane flounder, southern windowpane flounder, and witch flounder, for fishing years (FY) 2027 through 2031

The Groundfish Plan Development Team (PDT) met on September 10, 2026, and September 28, 2026, both by webinar, to discuss the data updates and develop possible OFL and ABC options for northern windowpane flounder, southern windowpane flounder, and witch flounder.

Overview

In general, the PDT applies the Council's current ABC control rule (see Amendment 16 and below) for groundfish stocks 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*

The Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) provided data updates for these three stocks, in lieu of management track assessments, which did not include using the assessment methods for setting catch advice. A data update was provided for witch flounder this year, while data updates were provided for the windowpane flounder stocks in 2025; however, the Council chose to defer updating specifications for the windowpane flounder stocks until this year.

To develop options, the PDT reviewed the data updates, the most recent management track assessment, and specification setting information (SSC report and PDT report) for each stock.

Summary by Groundfish Stock

For each stock, this memorandum provides a brief overview of the last management track assessment, summarizes the NEFSC data update, summarizes the stock status and rebuilding plan, provides fishery performance and economic information, and provides possible OFLs and ABCs for SSC consideration for FY2027-2031.

For possible OFL and ABC options, the PDT discussed updated survey biomass indices and fishery catch data in the data updates in context with the most recent management track assessments and resulting specifications for each stock to consider whether maintaining status quo catch advice is appropriate. Additionally, for each stock the PDT provides a second option to adjust ABCs using the updated survey biomass information provided in the data updates, given these three stocks all have empirical survey-based assessments. The PDT discusses uncertainties associated with status quo catch advice and the adjusted ABC option.

1. Northern windowpane flounder

Information Reviewed

Information the PDT reviewed included: the 2025 NEFSC data update, the 2023 stock assessment, SSC reports, PDT reports, and catch information.

2023 Management Track Assessment and FYs 2024-2026 Specifications

The 2023 assessment was an update to the empirical area swept model. Previously, the 2020 peer review panel rejected the AIM model due to a lack of a relationship between the catch and the survey index, and the area swept approach was developed in its place. Main sources of uncertainty in the 2023 assessment include: data limited assessment; potential unexplained mortality, with a lack of response seen in the survey biomass index despite apparently low exploitation rates; relationship between the catch and the index is not significant; inability to

generate biological reference points (BRPs); and uncertainty in catch input because the catch is almost entirely comprised of discards.

The OFL is considered unknown because the empirical model cannot estimate BRPs.

The current ABC was calculated¹ as the average of the exploitation rates of the no possession years (2010-2022) x 3-year average of the fall survey index.

Year 1 = Average of 2019 and 2021 (2020 missing)

Year 2 = 2021

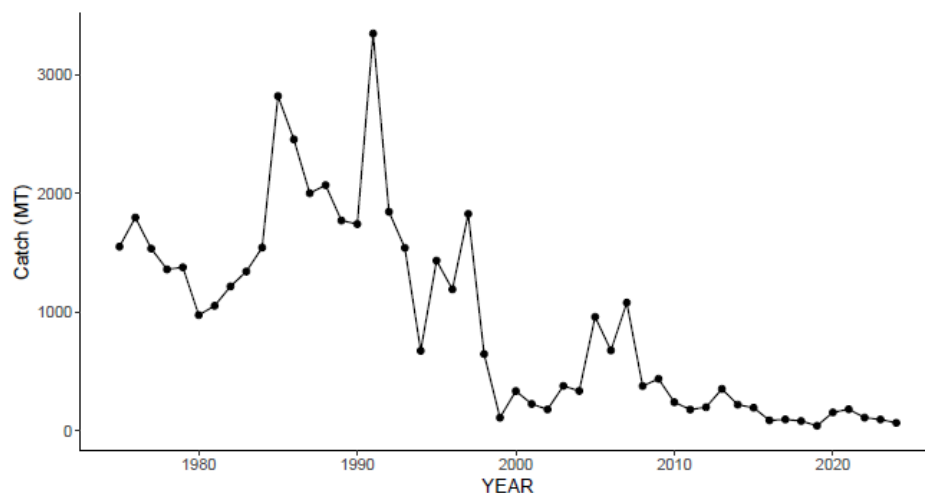
Year 3 = 2022

2025 NEFSC Data Update

The NEFSC provided a data update in 2025. This update included landings and discards from 1975 through 2024, spring and fall bottom trawl survey indices from 1975 through 2024 (biomass, kg/tow), and stratified mean indices at length (numbers/tow) for the bottom trawl survey from 1975 through 2024. Northern windowpane flounder has been managed as a zero-possession stock since 2010, and so catches are almost exclusively discards.

Total catch by calendar year is provided in the data update. Catches have remained relatively stable in recent years, following a large decline since possession was prohibited in 2010, and following additional declines seen since 2014 (Figure 1). Preliminary calendar year (CY) 2025 catch (104 mt) appears to be higher than 2024 catch (68 mt), but similar to previous recent years (2022-2023).

Figure 1- Total catch in metric tons (mt) of northern windowpane flounder from calendar year 1975 through 2024.



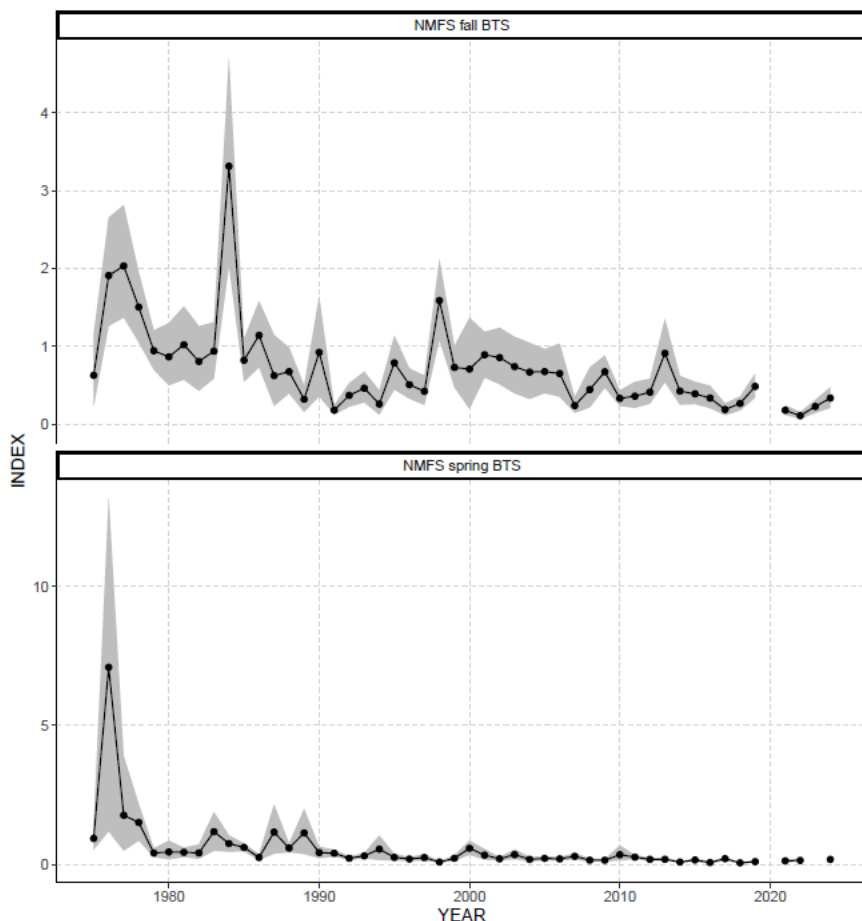
Source: 2025 Data Update

¹ For additional detail, see previous PDT memorandum: <https://tinyurl.com/bdcmfzz7>

NMFS spring and fall survey indices are provided in the data update. The assessment only includes the fall survey index, as there are more windowpane flounder available to that survey than in the spring. Therefore, the PDT focused its discussion on the fall index, though the spring survey indices are included for comparison. The fall survey index shows slight increases in the most recent years from 2022 through 2024 (Figure 2). The PDT also obtained the 2025 fall survey index to update the time series, which was a slight decline (0.3234).

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 because the mean indices are shown as colored boxes without tabular data or an indication of what lengths are considered recruits.

Figure 2- Bottom trawl survey index (biomass, kg/tow) of northern windowpane flounder from 1975 through 2024.



Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update

Stock Status and Rebuilding Plan

Based on the 2023 stock assessment report, northern windowpane flounder stock status is unknown. The NOAA current official status is that the stock is overfished, and overfishing is not

occurring. Northern windowpane flounder is in a rebuilding plan with a rebuild by date of 2029, but projections are not possible with the current empirical model formulation nor do quantitative estimates of biological reference points exist. The rebuilding plan specifies a fishing mortality rate of $70\%F_{msy}$, but that cannot be calculated.

Catch Projections

Catch projections are not possible for this stock. The OFL is considered unknown. The PDT applies a constant approach for ABCs. Possible ABCs are provided under two approaches: either maintaining status quo or adjusting based on updated fall survey information. The PDT discusses important uncertainties and considerations with either option. The PDT is not providing a recommendation, as the PDT feels there is compelling information to support either option. The PDT is providing both the status quo ABC and a survey-adjusted ABC for the SSC's consideration without recommending a preferred approach. The PDT considered both approaches to be defensible given available information. Maintaining the status quo ABC is supported by the stock's overfished status, rebuilding plan, and substantial uncertainty in stock status and BRPs. Conversely, the rationale for incorporating updated survey information is that updating the ABC based on the fall survey index allows catch advice to incorporate the most recent abundance information available. Though the information provided is in the form of a data update, the updates to the fall survey index are not substantively different to information that would be presented in an empirical stock assessment based on the fall survey index. This simplified adjustment does not incorporate all components of the assessment methodology including year-specific catchability.

Status quo

The PDT provides status quo ABCs for consideration (Table 1). Status quo ABCs have been in place for the past three fishing years (FY 2024-2026), as recommended by the SSC.

Uncertainties and Considerations – The PDT discussed the appropriateness of continuing status quo ABCs. While there has not been a substantial change in catch in recent years, there is a slight increase in the survey index. Though relative to the long-term time series (Figure 2), this does not show much increase in the indices overall. The PDT notes the overfished status and rebuilding plan.

Alternative option for survey-adjusted ABCs

The PDT developed an alternative option to adjust the ABCs using the updated fall survey information.

Method - The status quo ABCs are based on the 3-year average of the fall survey (2020-2022, noting that 2020 is missing and is based on the average of 2019 and 2021). The adjusted ABCs are based on adjusting the current ABC by the change in the 3-year average of the fall survey. The PDT compared the most recent 3-year average (2023-2025) to the previous 3-year average (2020-2022; Figure 3). The resulting percent change was used to adjust the current ABC (Table 2).

NEFSC Fall Survey index (kg/tow)

3 yr avg 2020-2022	0.200
3 yr avg 2023-2025	0.297

ABC adjustment = 49% increase

Uncertainties and Considerations – Given the empirical area swept assessment is directly based on the survey, the PDT thinks it reasonable to assume that changes in the survey index inform changes in abundance in considering the adjusted ABC approach. Noting however that the assessment includes catch efficiencies for the Bigelow trawl net specifically for windowpane flounder from an industry-based paired gear study to estimate annual swept-area biomass and exploitation rates (catch/biomass), and so this adjusted ABC approach does not incorporate year-specific catchability and any influence this might have on the assessment outputs. Nevertheless, this stock with its simple empirical assessment method appears to be the most reasonable application of the adjusted ABC approach.

The PDT refers to the current Council Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) initiative to develop a screening process that identifies potential candidates for Ecosystem Component Species (ECS) designation.² Northern windowpane flounder could be a candidate for such a designation, and it is expected the Council will consider applying the screening process and developing ECS designation as a priority as soon as 2027. Thus, specification setting could be considered an interim approach towards a transition to ECS management.

Northern windowpane flounder is a non-target, zero possession stock and the PDT would not expect increased targeting with a higher ABC under the adjusted ABC option. This would seem to be more about providing management relief in the short term to reduce the potential for accountability measure (AM) criteria to be met for both the groundfish and scallop fisheries. However, recent catches have not met the criteria for AMs. Discussed in more detail below under *Additional Fishery Information*, interactions with the scallop fishery are driven largely by area access and the degree of overlap between areas of scallop fishery effort and the northern windowpane flounder stock area.

² See: <https://tinyurl.com/45zkauxr>

Figure 3- Fall bottom trawl survey index (kg/tow) for northern windowpane flounder and recent 3-year average survey biomass index values used to adjust ABCs.

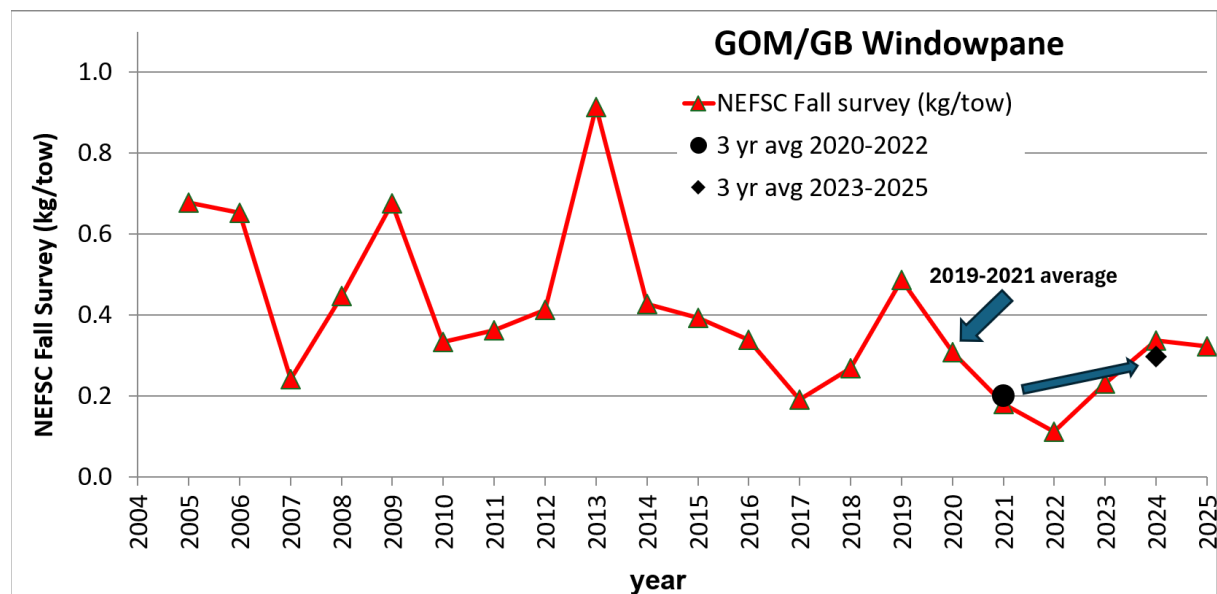


Table 1- Possible OFLs and ABCs (mt) for FY2027- FY2031 for northern windowpane flounder, following status quo catch advice, using a constant approach for five years.

Fishing Year	Possible OFL (mt)	Possible ABC (mt)
2027	Unknown	136
2028	Unknown	136
2029	Unknown	136
2030	Unknown	136
2031	Unknown	136

Table 2- Possible OFLs and ABCs (mt) for FY2027- FY2031 for northern windowpane flounder, following and adjusted ABC calculation based on updated surveys, using a constant approach for five years.

Fishing Year	Possible OFL (mt)	Possible ABC (mt)
2027	Unknown	202
2028	Unknown	202
2029	Unknown	202
2030	Unknown	202
2031	Unknown	202

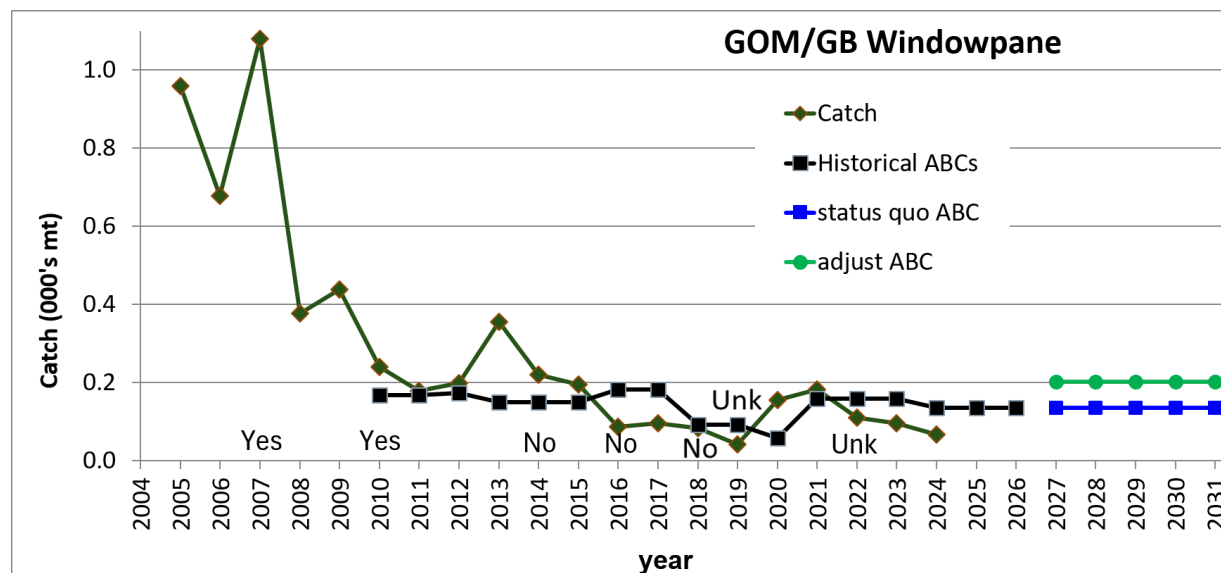
Catch Performance

Table 3 and Figure 4 summarize catch performance and changes in overfishing status for northern windowpane flounder.

Table 3- Catch performance (CY2010-CY2024), historical OFLs and ABCs (FY2010-FY2026), and using a constant OFL and ABC approach (FY2027-FY2031) for northern windowpane flounder.

Year	Catch	Historical OFLs	Historical ABCs	Option 1 Status Quo	Option 2 ABC Adjustment
2010	241	225	169		
2011	179	225	169		
2012	199	230	173		
2013	356	202	151		
2014	221	202	151		
2015	195	202	151		
2016	88	243	182		
2017	96	243	182		
2018	83	122	92		
2019	43	122	92		
2020	156	84	59		
2021	182	Unk	160		
2022	111	Unk	160		
2023	96	Unk	160		
2024	68	Unk	136		
2025		Unk	136		
2026		Unk	136		
2027				136	202
2028				136	202
2029				136	202
2030				136	202
2031				136	202

Figure 4- Catch performance for northern windowpane flounder including: catches from CY2005-CY2024, historical OFLs and ABCs since FY2010, and FY2027-FY2031 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 – Northern windowpane flounder is a zero possession, non-allocated stock, catches are nearly entirely discards, and any catch that does occur is considered bycatch. Catch and utilization by the commercial groundfish fishery has been well below the ACL in recent years (Table 5). The sector component of the commercial groundfish fishery has had high levels of monitoring coverage in recent years with achieved monitoring coverage >80%.

Scallop Fishery - The scallop fishery is allocated a fixed percentage sub-ACL of 21% of the total northern windowpane flounder ABC. When the criteria for implementing accountability measures (AMs) is met, the scallop fishery is subject to area-based gear restrictions depending on the overage. The majority of total catch in recent years is from the scallop fishery (Table 5).

The northern windowpane flounder sub-ACL for the scallop fishery was first implemented in 2017, and in every year since its implementation, the scallop fishery has exceeded its sub-ACL. The AM has been implemented four times. Recently, the AM criteria were revised so that the criteria are met only if the total ACL is exceeded, in addition to the scallop fishery exceeding its sub-ACL. Thus, while the scallop fishery exceeded its sub-ACL in FY2024, the AM was not implemented, as total catch remained below the ACL.

The Scallop PDT expects Closed Area II to be closed to scallop fishery access for the upcoming year, but anticipates that substantial scallop fishery activity will continue in the open bottom directly west of Area II in the Southern Flank. This open bottom on Georges Bank and down

through the Great South Channel are areas where generally higher bycatch rates of northern windowpane flounder occur.³

Table 4- Recent commercial groundfish fishery catch and utilization for northern windowpane flounder.

	<i>Commercial Groundfish Fishery</i>		
	Sub-ACL (mt)	Total Catch (mt)	Utilization (%)
FY2023	105.0	9.4	9.0%
FY2024	94.0	9.3	9.9%
FY2025 (preliminary)	93.6	10.8	11.5%

Source: Multispecies FY2023 and FY2024 Year-End Final Catch Reports; FY2025 Quota Monitoring, GARFO.

Table 5- Final year-end catch data for northern windowpane flounder by the scallop fishery for FYs 2022 through 2024.

Groundfish Fishing Year	<i>Scallop Fishery – Northern Windowpane Flounder</i>					
	Total ACL (mt)	Total Catch (mt)	Percent Total ACL Caught	Scallop sub- ACL (mt)	Scallop Catch (mt)	Percent Scallop ACL Caught
2022	150	110	73.5%	31	101.1	326.1%
2023	150	94.3	63.0%	31	81.7	261.8%
2024	128	71.0	55.5%	27	53.3	197.4%

Sources: Multispecies FY2022 – FY2024 final year-end catch reports, GARFO.

2. Southern windowpane flounder

Information Reviewed

Information the PDT reviewed included: the 2025 NEFSC data update, the 2023 stock assessment, SSC reports, PDT reports, and catch information.

2023 Management Track Assessment and FY 2024-2026 Specifications

The 2023 assessment was an update to the AIM model. The main sources of uncertainty include: data limited assessment; uncertainty in catch input given almost entirely discards

Catch projections from the AIM model are not possible. OFLs and ABCs for FYs 2024-2026 were determined by applying the updated F_{MSY} proxy and $75\%F_{MSY}$ proxy to the 3-year average of the fall biomass index at the end of the time series and applying a constant approach.

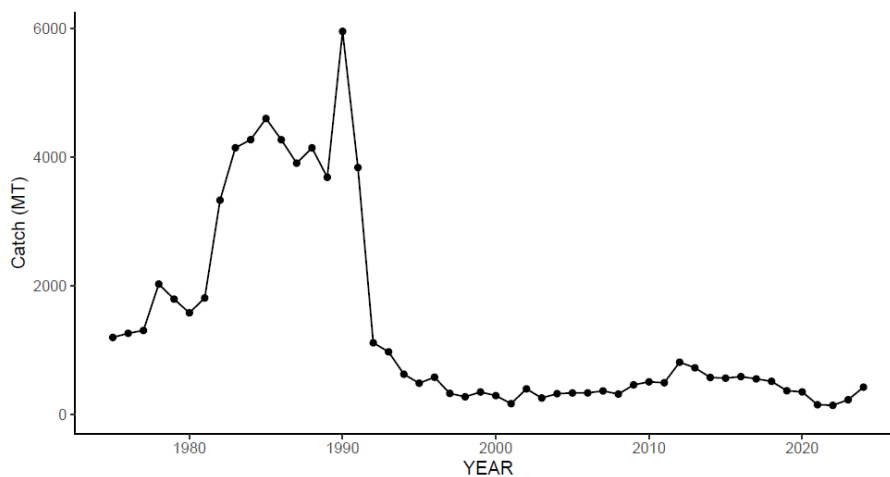
³ For additional information on scallop fishing activity on Georges Bank, see Scallop PDT memo on GB yellowtail flounder: <https://tinyurl.com/bdn4yes4>

2025 NEFSC Data Update

The NEFSC provided a data update in 2025. This update included landings and discards from 1975 through 2024, spring and fall bottom trawl survey indices from 1975 through 2024 (biomass, kg/tow) and stratified mean indices at length (numbers/tow) for the bottom trawl survey from 1975 through 2024. Southern windowpane flounder has been managed as a zero-possession stock since 2010 and catches are almost exclusively discards.

Total catch by calendar year is provided in the data update. Catches had been relatively stable overall with a slight decline, until 2024 when there was a large increase in catch (429 mt) to levels seen prior to 2019 (Figure 5). Preliminary CY 2025 catch (431 mt) is similar to catch in 2024. Aggregated total catch makes it challenging to determine what might be driving the recent increased catch trend, but the PDT examined catch by fishery component in recent fishing years (discussed below under *Additional Fishery Information*).

Figure 5- Total catch in metric tons (mt) of southern windowpane flounder from calendar year 1975 through 2024.



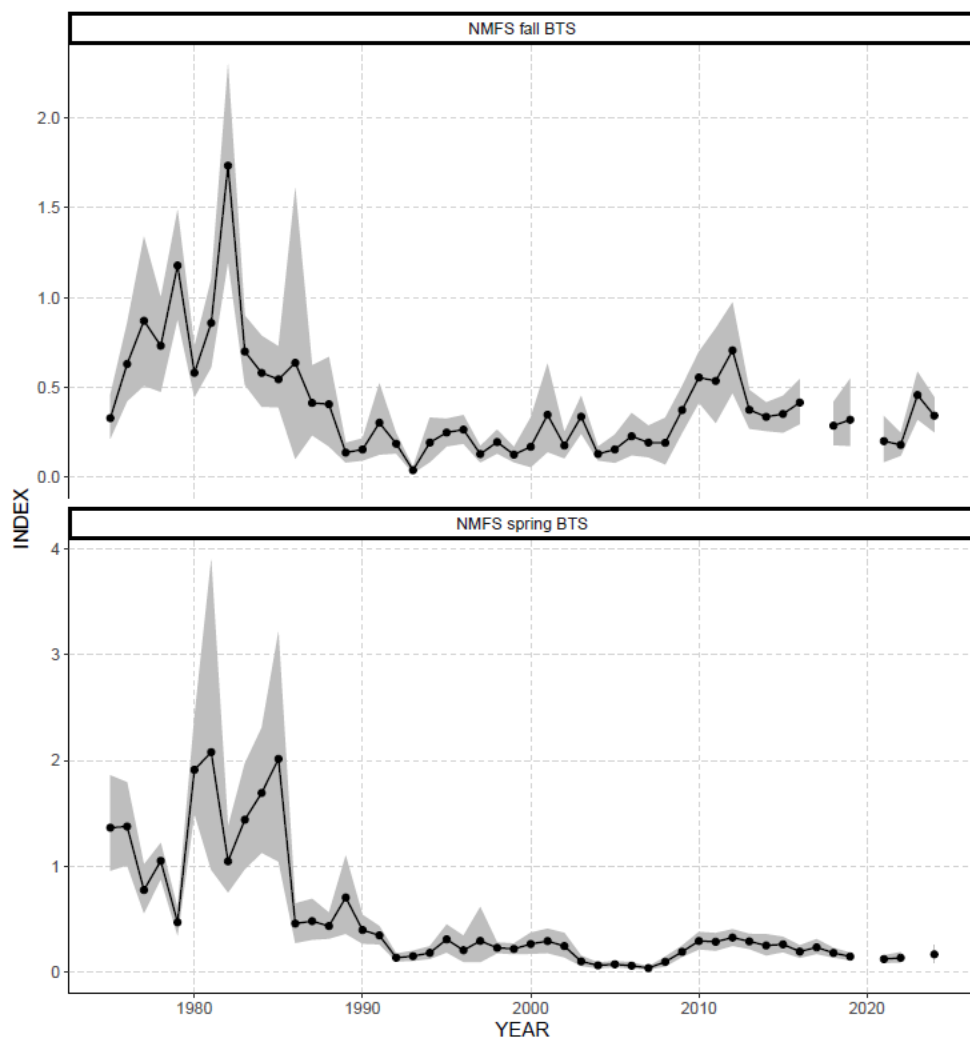
Source: 2025 Data Update

NMFS spring and fall survey indices are provided in the data update. Similar to northern windowpane flounder, the assessment only includes the fall survey index, as there are more windowpane flounder available to the fall survey than in the spring. Therefore, the PDT focused its discussion on the fall index, though the spring survey indices are included for comparison. The fall survey index has been variable in recent years. The index increased from 2022 to 2023 and then declined from 2023 to 2024 (Figure 6). The 2022 index (0.1796) was the lowest since 2005 and the 2024 index (0.3419) was in line with values seen in 2013 through 2015. The PDT also obtained the 2025 fall survey index to update the time series which was another decline (0.2849).

The 2025 data update also provided stratified mean indices at length, per tow, from the bottom trawl survey. As with northern windowpane flounder, the PDT found the figures challenging to

interpret without additional information because the mean indices are shown as colored boxes without tabular data or an indication of what lengths are considered recruits.

Figure 6- Fall bottom trawl survey index (biomass, kg/tow) of southern windowpane flounder from 1975 through 2024.



Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update

Stock Status and Rebuilding Plan

Based on the 2023 stock assessment report, southern windowpane flounder is not overfished, and overfishing is not occurring. Southern windowpane flounder is rebuilt as of 2012.

Catch Projections

Catch projections are not possible for this stock. The PDT applies a constant approach for OFLs and ABCs. Possible OFLs and ABCs are provided under two approaches: either maintaining status quo or adjusting OFL and ABCs based on updated fall survey information. The PDT discusses important uncertainties and considerations with either option. The PDT recommends the Alternative option for adjusted OFLs and ABCs for the reasons discussed below.

Status quo

The PDT provides status quo ABCs for consideration (Table 6). Status quo ABCs have been in place for the past three fishing years (FY 2024-2026), which were recommended by the SSC.

Uncertainties and considerations – The PDT discussed the appropriateness of status quo OFLs and ABCs. Updated information shows an increase in catch and in the survey indices in recent years. In particular, the recent high catches in 2024 and 2025 were the subject of numerous public comments raised at the April 2026 Council meeting on fishery interactions with southern windowpane flounder and concerns on the impacts of the AMs, which were anticipated to be implemented based on catches in FY2024. Given the stock status as not overfished and rebuilt, the PDT believes that maintaining status quo ABCs could be overly constraining fisheries without addressing a biological concern.

Alternative option for survey-adjusted OFLs and ABCs

The PDT developed an alternative option to adjust the OFLs and ABCs using the updated fall survey information and recommends these adjusted OFLs and ABCs.

Method - The status quo OFLs and ABCs are based on the 3-year average of the fall survey (2020-2022, noting that 2020 is missing and is based on the average of 2019 and 2021). The adjusted ABCs are based on adjusting the status quo ABC by the change in the 3-year average of the fall survey. The PDT compared the most recent 3-year average (2023-2025) to the previous 3-year average (2020-2022, Figure 7). The resulting percent change was used to adjust the OFL and ABC (Table 7).

NEFSC Fall Survey index (kg/tow)

3 yr avg 2020-2022	0.213
3 yr avg 2023-2025	0.361

ABC adjustment = 69% increase

Uncertainties and considerations – While the AIM model as an empirical assessment and is based largely on the survey, the AIM model adjusts the relationship between survey index and catch inputs which makes it more difficult to predict the assessment output and less straightforward to interpret. There is an increase in both the catch and survey index, which may give an indication that the AIM model would provide higher catch advice, if it were updated. However, the AIM model also re-estimates the F_{MSY} proxy reference points, which were not updated and are hard to predict without a model rerun. The 69-percent increase in the ABC adjustment therefore assumes no change in the F_{MSY} proxy. Thus, the 69% adjustment to the OFL and ABC is equivalent to using the 2023 F_{MSY} proxy and $75\%F_{MSY}$ proxy multiplied by the 3-year average of the updated fall biomass index.

Southern windowpane flounder could potentially be a candidate stock for Ecosystem Component Species (ECS) designation due to its positive stock status and lack of directed fishery. As such, it is included as a case study stock in the pilot application of the ECS screening process being developed through the Council's IRA initiative project⁴. It is expected the Council will consider developing ECS designation as a priority as soon as 2027. Thus, specification setting could be considered an interim approach, with stronger rationale for the alternative ABCs if the Council decides to move towards ECS designation

Southern windowpane flounder is a non-target, zero possession stock, and the PDT would not expect increased targeting with a higher ABC under the adjusted ABC option. Increasing the ABC is more about providing management relief in the short-term to reduce the potential for AMs to be implemented for both the groundfish and large-mesh non-groundfish trawl fisheries. The AM criteria were met in FY 2024 by both the groundfish fishery and the large-mesh non-groundfish fisheries, and the Council heard numerous public comments raising concerns from industry on the expected economic impacts of the AMs when implemented.

Figure 7- Fall bottom trawl survey index (kg/tow) for southern windowpane flounder and recent 3-year average survey biomass index values used to adjust ABCs.

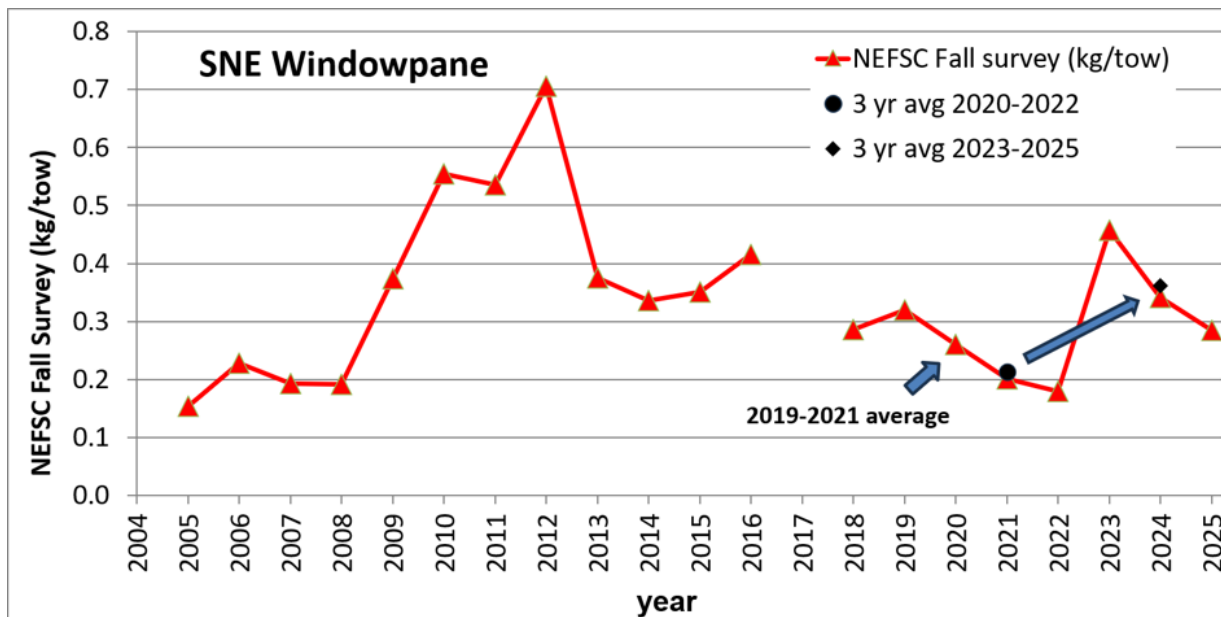


Table 6- Possible OFLs and ABCs (mt) for FY2027- FY2031 for southern windowpane flounder, following status quo catch advice, using a constant approach for five years.

Fishing Year	Possible OFL (mt)	Possible ABC (mt)
2027	284	213

⁴ See: <https://tinyurl.com/45zkauxr>

2028	284	213
2029	284	213
2030	284	213
2031	284	213

Table 7- Possible OFLs and ABCs (mt) for FY2027- FY2031 for southern windowpane flounder, following and adjusted OFL and ABC calculation based on updated surveys, using a constant approach for five years.

Fishing Year	Possible OFL (mt)	Possible ABC (mt)
2027	481	361
2028	481	361
2029	481	361
2030	481	361
2031	481	361

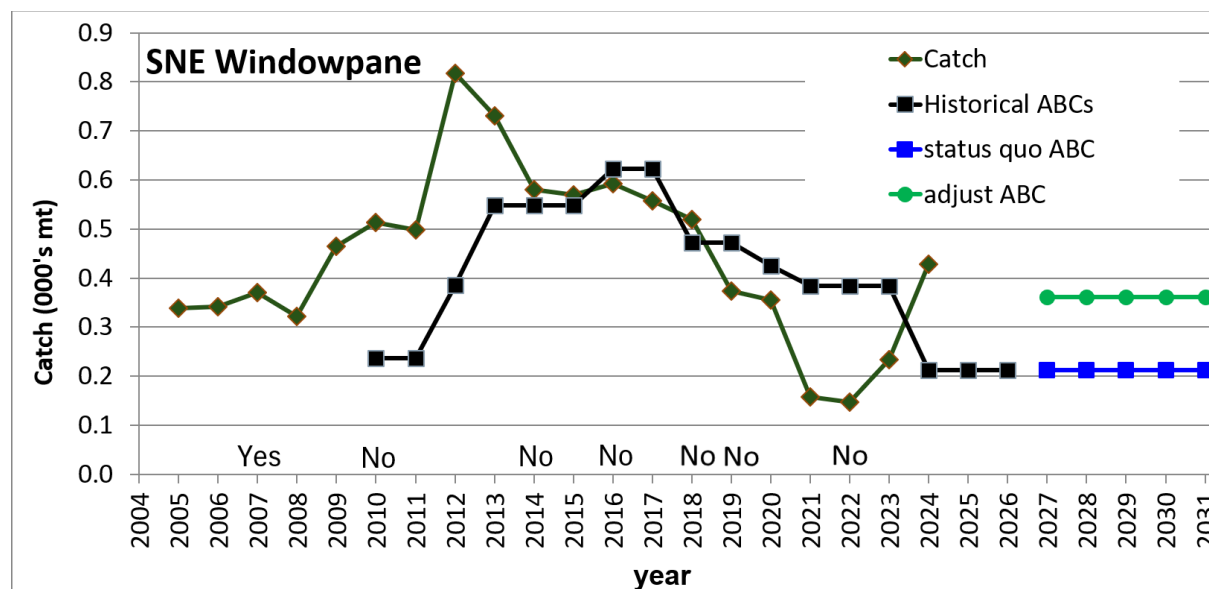
Catch Performance

Table 8 and Figure 8 summarize catch performance and changes in overfishing status for southern windowpane flounder.

Table 8- Catch performance (CY2010-CY2024), historical OFLs and ABCs (FY2010-FY2026), and using a constant OFL and ABC approach (FY2027-FY2031) for southern windowpane flounder.

Year	Catch	Historical OFLs	Historical ABCs	<u>Option 1</u> Status Quo	<u>Option 2</u> ABC Adjustment
2010	513	317	237		
2011	498	317	237		
2012	817	515	386		
2013	731	730	548		
2014	580	730	548		
2015	569	730	548		
2016	593	833	623		
2017	558	833	623		
2018	520	631	473		
2019	374	631	473		
2020	356	568	426		
2021	157	513	384		
2022	147	513	384		
2023	234	513	384		
2024	429	284	213		
2025		284	213		
2026		284	213		
2027				213	361
2028				213	361
2029				213	361
2030				213	361
2031				213	361

Figure 8- Catch performance for southern windowpane including: catches from CY2005-CY2024, historical OFLs and ABCs since FY2010, and FY2027-FY2031 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 –Southern windowpane flounder is a zero possession, non-allocated stock, catches are nearly entirely discards, and any catch that does occur is considered bycatch. The commercial groundfish fishery exceeded its sub-ACL in FY 2024, meeting the criteria for implementing AMs, which are area-based gear restrictions dependent on the size of the overage. Recent catch and utilization are shown in Table 9.

Scallop Fishery – The scallop fishery is allocated a fixed percentage sub-ACL of 36 percent of the total southern windowpane flounder ABC. When the criteria for implementing AMs are met, the scallop fishery is subject to area-based gear restrictions dependent on the size of the overage. The scallop fishery has not exceeded its sub-ACL in recent years. A summary of recent catches by the scallop fishery is provided in Table 10.

Large-mesh non-groundfish fisheries – Large-mesh non-groundfish fisheries (mainly summer flounder and scup) can have an AM if the ‘other fisheries’ sub-component (which include catches in fisheries other than groundfish and scallops) and the overall ACL are both exceeded. The other fisheries sub-component is a percentage of the total southern windowpane flounder ABC based on recent catch estimates. When the criteria for implementing accountability measures (AMs) are met, the large-mesh non-groundfish fisheries can be subject to AMs that implement area-based gear restrictions dependent on the size of the overage. The majority of total catch of southern windowpane flounder in recent years is from these other sub-components

fisheries (Table 11). Catch previously exceeded the sub-ACL in FYs 2019, 2020, 2023, and most recently in FY2024 when the AM criteria were met.

Table 9- Recent commercial groundfish fishery catch and utilization for southern windowpane flounder.

	<i>Commercial Groundfish Fishery</i>		
	Sub-ACL (mt)	Total Catch (mt)	Utilization (%)
FY2023	45.0	12.4	27.6%
FY2024	30.0	35.3	117.7%
FY2025 (preliminary)	29.7	24.4	82.2%

Source: Multispecies FY2023 and FY2024 Year-End Final Catch Reports; FY2025 Quota Monitoring, GARFO.

Table 10- Final year-end catch data for southern windowpane flounder for the scallop fishery for fishing years 2022 through 2024.

Groundfish Fishing Year	<i>Scallop Fishery – Southern Windowpane Flounder</i>					
	Total ACL (mt)	Total Catch (mt)	Percent Total ACL Caught	Scallop sub-ACL (mt)	Scallop Catch (mt)	Percent Scallop ACL Caught
2022	371	119.5	32.2%	129	10.5	8.1%
2023	371	272.2	73.4%	129	5.6	4.4%
2024	205	425.4	207.5%	71	3.9	5.5%

Sources: Multispecies FY2022 – FY2024 final year-end catch reports, GARFO.

Table 11- Final year-end catch data for southern windowpane flounder for the “other sub-component” fisheries for FYs 2022 through 2024.

Groundfish Fishing Year	<i>Other Sub-components – Southern Windowpane Flounder</i>					
	Total ACL (mt)	Total Catch (mt)	Percent Total ACL Caught	“Other” sub- ACL (mt)	“Other” catch (mt)	Percent sub- ACL Caught
2022	371	119.5	32.2%	177	93.5	53%
2023	371	272.2	73.4%	184	240.5	130.5%
2024	205	425.4	207.5%	98	363.3	370.7%

Sources: Multispecies FY2022 – FY2024 final year-end catch reports, GARFO.

3. *Witch flounder*

Information Reviewed

Information the PDT reviewed included: the 2026 NEFSC data update, the 2024 stock assessment, SSC reports, PDT reports, and catch information.

2024 Management Track Assessment and Fishing Years 2025-2027 Specifications

The 2024 assessment was an update to the empirical area swept method. Main sources of uncertainty include: inability to generate reference points; age structure information cannot be incorporated into the assessment method; and uncertainty in catch data due to misreporting case.

The OFL is considered unknown. ABCs for FYs 2025-2027 were determined based on the Council’s ABC control rule (following option D) and rebuilding plans, held constant.

ABC = mean exploitation rate (2007-2015) x 3-year average of exploitable biomass (2022-2024)
 Year 1 (2022): Average of Fall 2021 and Spring 2022
 Year 2 (2023): Fall 2022
 Year 3 (2024): Average of Fall 2023 and Spring 2024

An informational ASAP model was conducted as part of this assessment to serve as a step towards an analytical assessment in the future.⁵

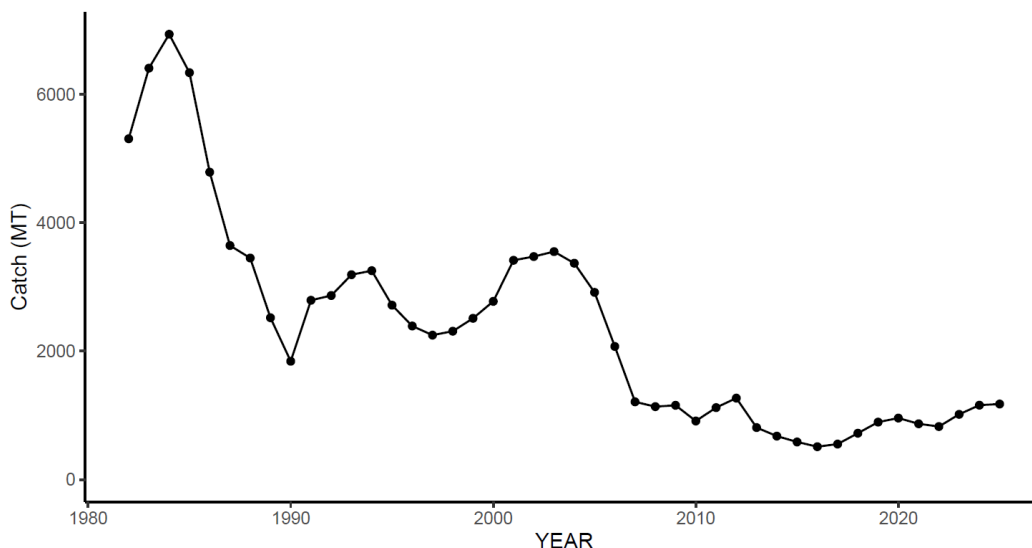
2026 NEFSC Data Update

The NEFSC provided a data update in 2026. This update included landings and discards from 1982 through 2025, bottom trawl survey indices (fall from 1963 through 2025 and spring from 1968 through 2026) (biomass, kg/tow) and stratified mean indices at length for the bottom trawl survey from 1963 through 2026.

⁵ For additional discussion, see previous PDT memorandum: <https://tinyurl.com/4vh2db3u>

Total catch by calendar year is provided in the data update. Catches have increased since 2022 to levels last seen in 2012 (Figure 9).

Figure 9- Total catch in metric tons (mt) of witch flounder from calendar year 1975 through 2024.

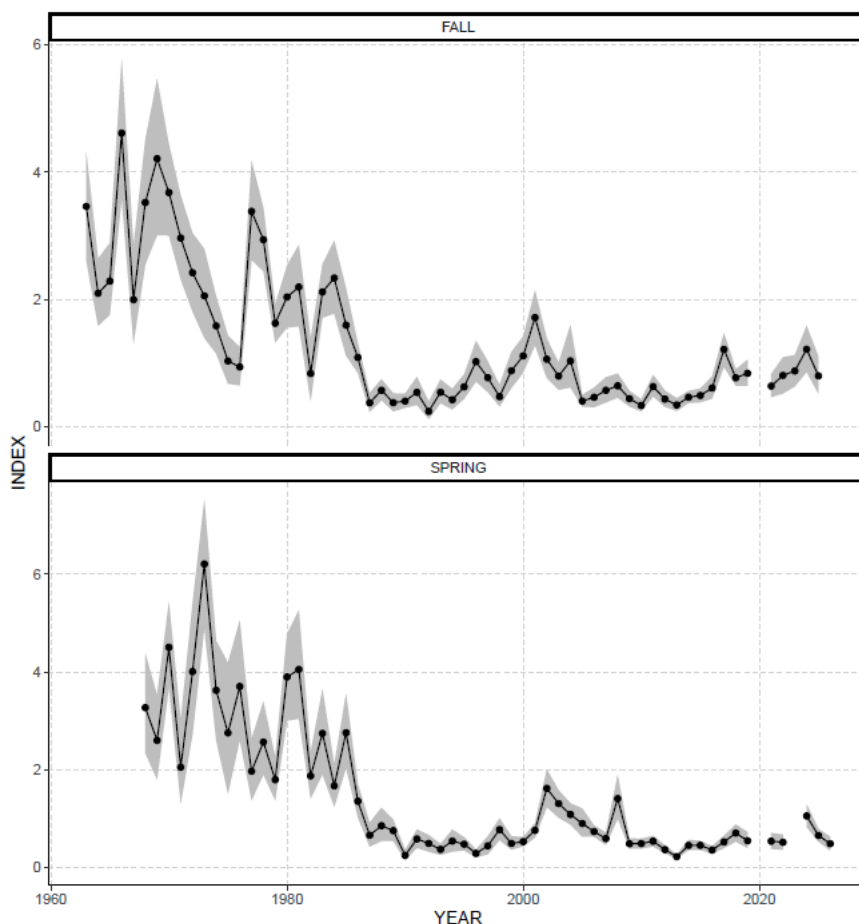


Source: 2026 NEFSC Data Update.

NMFS spring and fall survey indices are provided in the data update. The spring survey index is missing data from 2020 and 2023, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and vessel challenges, respectively. The index shows a decreasing trend from 2024-2026, a return to levels seen for most of the 2010s after an inferred, but unsurveyed, spike in 2023. The fall survey index is missing data in 2020 only. It captured a brief spike in 2024 followed by a decline in 2025 to levels seen through much of the past decade.

The 2026 data update also provided stratified mean indices at length per tow from the bottom trawl survey because the mean indices are shown as colored boxes without tabular data or an indication of which lengths are considered recruits.

Figure 10- Bottom trawl survey index (biomass, kg/tow) of witch flounder from 1963 through 2026.



Source: 2026 NEFSC Data Update.

Stock Status and Rebuilding Plan

Based on the 2024 stock assessment report, witch flounder is overfished, and overfishing is unknown. Witch flounder is in a rebuilding plan with a rebuilding plan date of 2043, but projections are not possible with the current empirical model formulation and quantitative estimates of BRPs cannot be calculated. As of the 2024 assessment, stock condition appears to be improving but remains poor relative to historical levels.

Catch Projections

Catch projections are not possible for this stock. The OFL is considered unknown. The PDT applies a constant approach for ABCs. Possible ABCs are provided under two approaches: either maintaining status quo or adjusting ABCs based on updated spring and fall survey information. The PDT discusses important uncertainties and consideration with either option. The PDT is not providing a recommendation, as the PDT feels there isn't a clear indication of a change in the biomass in the updated information and acknowledges that a potential small adjustment based on the new information is within the error of the survey.

Status quo

The PDT provides status quo OFLs and ABCs for consideration (Table 12). Status quo OFLs and ABCs have been in place for the past two fishing years (FY 2025-2026), which were recommended by the SSC.

Uncertainties and considerations – The PDT discussed the appropriateness of status quo OFLs and ABCs. Updated information shows a slight increase in catch recent years that seems to follow the increase in ACLs from the previous assessment. Survey indices show a mixed picture. The spring survey index has declined from 2024 through 2026, while the fall survey increased substantially in 2024 before declining in 2025 to levels similar to those observed through much of the past decade. Taken together, the updated survey information does not provide a clear indication of a change in stock abundance. The PDT also notes that witch flounder remains overfished and in a rebuilding plan, the OFL and quantitative BRPs are unknown, and projections are not possible under the current empirical assessment.

Alternative option for survey-adjusted ABCs

The PDT developed an alternative option to adjust the ABCs using the updated spring and fall survey information.

Method - The status quo ABCs are based on the 3-year average of exploitable biomass, in which the spring and fall survey indices are averaged together for each of the 3 years. The adjusted ABCs are based on adjusting by the change in the 2-year average of the fall and spring survey. For the spring survey, the PDT compared the most recent 2-year average (2025-2026) to the previous 2-year average (2022 and 2024; note that 2023 is missing). For the fall survey, the PDT compared the most recent 2-year average (2024-2025) to the previous 3-year average (2021-2023) (Figure 11). The resulting percent change for each survey appears to nearly cancel out one another, resulting in a 1-percent increase in ABC (Table 13).

NEFSC Spr Survey	index (kg/tow)
avg 2022 & 2024	0.776
avg 2025-2026	0.561

NEFSC Fall Survey	index (kg/tow)
avg 2021-2023	0.772
avg 2024-2025	1.006

Spring 28% decrease + Fall 30% increase = 1% increase (rounded to nearest %)

Uncertainties and considerations – Given the empirical area swept assessment is directly based on the surveys, the PDT thinks it reasonable to assume that changes in the survey index inform changes in abundance in considering the adjusted ABC approach. However, the inclusion of two surveys leads to complication. It is not clear from the updated surveys if there is indication of an

increase among the two survey indices at this time, as they show opposite trends that appear to cancel out. Additionally, there are only 2 years of updated survey information in the data update while the 2024 assessment was based on 3 years. The ABC adjustment of 1 percent is within the error and thus difficult to interpret. Thus, while the survey-adjusted approach is consistent with the empirical basis of the assessment, the available updated survey information provides little evidence of a meaningful change in abundance that would warrant a change from the status quo ABC.

Witch flounder is an important target species and a constraining stock for the groundfish fishery. While the alternative ABC is only a 20-mt difference, this does suggest value in evaluating the potential for an alternative to status quo catch advice given the importance to the fishery. Preliminary FY 2025 data shows lower utilization by the groundfish sector fishery. This perhaps suggests the increase in catch advice from the last assessment was enough to lift some of the constraint. However, the PDT also heard industry comments that point to multiple factors that may have influenced utilization in FY2025. Confounding factors included an emergency action setting a Gulf of Maine (GOM)) cod quota based on assessments from Georges Bank Cod, Eastern Gulf of Maine Cod, and Western Gulf of Maine cod, interactions with cod and cod avoidance, and regulatory delays preventing the fishery from accessing its full quota for GOM haddock. The PDT also notes the increase in fuel price beginning in March-April 2026, which may have resulted in lower effort overall.

Given there is little to no biological difference in the effect on the stock between the two options (the ABC values are very similar), the PDT discussed whether this would point towards considering fishery socioeconomic benefits (consistent with National Standard 8⁶).

Witch flounder is scheduled for a management track assessment in 2027. The PDT understands that is planned to be an update of the empirical assessment. Thus, this adjusted ABC approach may provide some indication of where the assessment update next year is heading, with an additional year of data.

⁶ See [50 CFR 600.345](#).

Figure 11- Spring and fall bottom trawl survey index (kg/tow) for witch flounder and recent 3-year average survey biomass index values used to adjust ABCs.

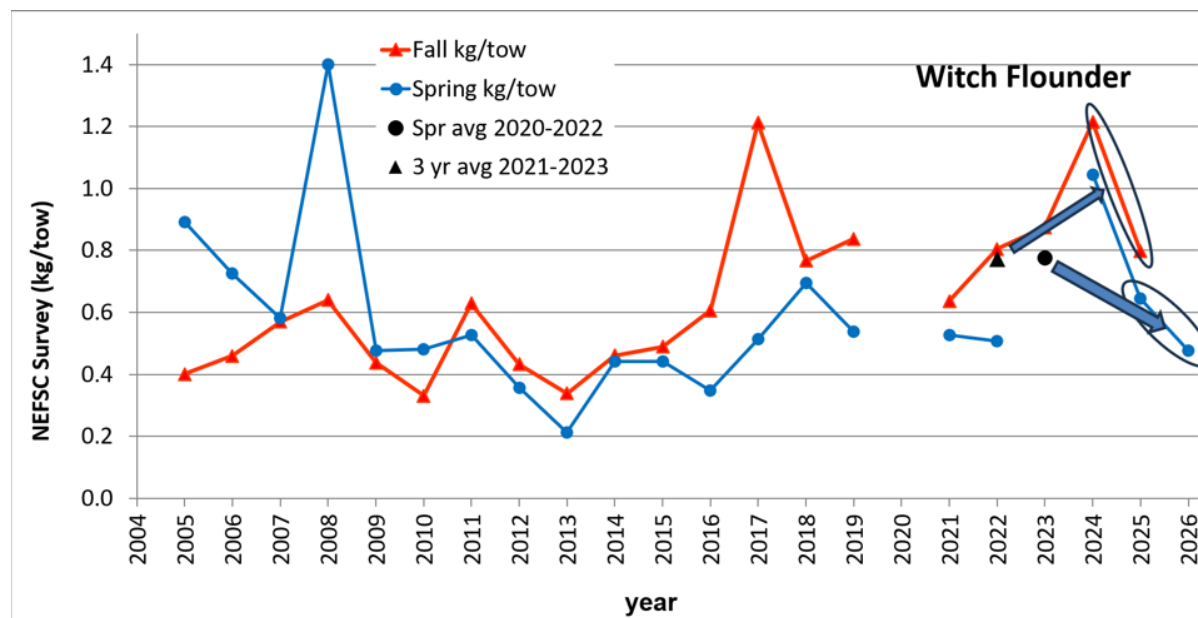


Table 12- Possible OFLs and ABCs (mt) for FY2027- FY2031 for witch flounder, following status quo catch advice, using a constant approach for five years.

Fishing Year	Possible OFL (mt)	Possible ABC (mt)
2027	Unknown	1,526
2028	Unknown	1,526
2029	Unknown	1,526
2030	Unknown	1,526
2031	Unknown	1,526

Table 13- Possible OFLs and ABCs (mt) for FY2027- FY2031 for witch flounder, following and adjusted ABC calculation based on updated surveys, using a constant approach for five years.

Fishing Year	Possible OFL (mt)	Possible ABC (mt)
2027	Unknown	1,547
2028	Unknown	1,547
2029	Unknown	1,547
2030	Unknown	1,547
2031	Unknown	1,547

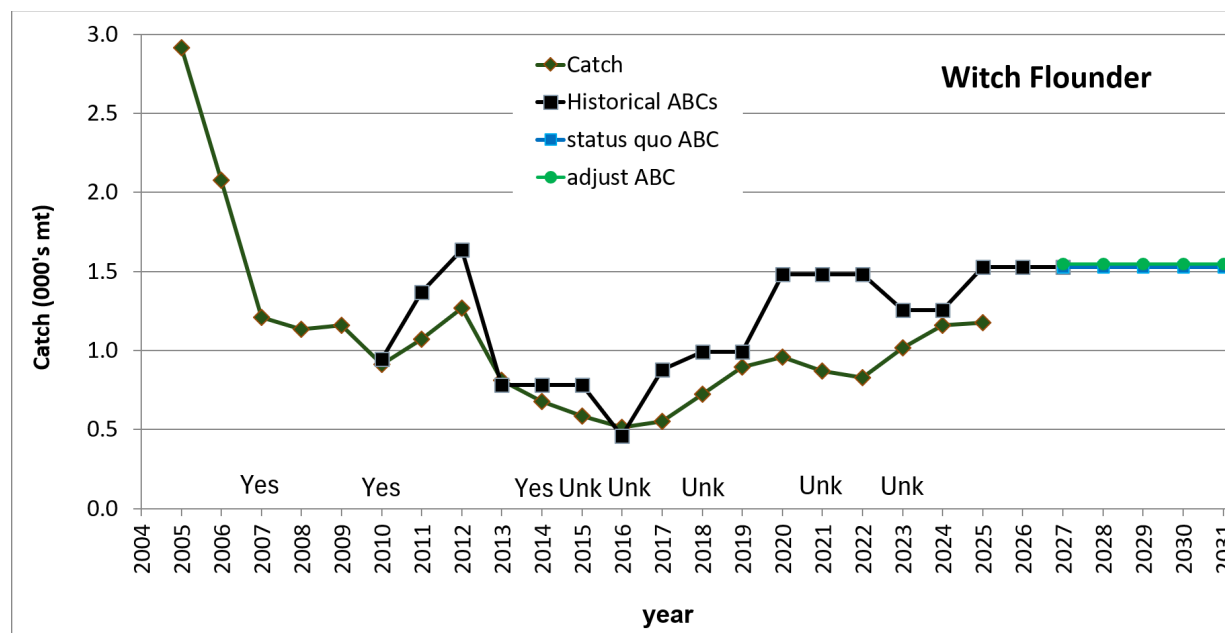
Catch Performance

Table 14 and Figure 12 summarize catch performance and changes in overfishing status for witch flounder.

Table 14- Catch performance (CY2010-CY2025), historical OFLs and ABCs (FY2010-FY2027), and using a constant ABC approach with unknown OFLs (FY2027-FY2032) for witch flounder.

Year	Catch	Historical OFLs	Historical ABCs	<u>Option 1</u> Status Quo	<u>Option 2</u> ABC Adjustment
2010	913	1,239	944		
2011	1,072	1,792	1,369		
2012	1,269	2,141	1,639		
2013	811	1,196	783		
2014	677	1,512	783		
2015	586	1,846	783		
2016	512	521	460		
2017	553	Undefined	878		
2018	722	Undefined	993		
2019	895	Undefined	993		
2020	958	Undefined	1,483		
2021	869	Undefined	1,483		
2022	826	Undefined	1,483		
2023	1,016	Undefined	1,256		
2024	1,159	Undefined	1,256		
2025	1,177	Undefined	1,526		
2026		Undefined	1,526		
2027		Undefined	1,526	1,526	1,547
2028				1,526	1,547
2029				1,526	1,547
2030				1,526	1,547
2031				1,526	1,547

Figure 12- Catch performance for witch flounder including: catches from CY2005-CY2025, historical OFLs and ABCs since FY2010, and FY2027-FY2031 constant ABCs with unknown OFLs. Overfishing status in the terminal year of the assessment indicated on the x-axis (“Yes” = overfishing and “Unk”= overfishing status unknown).



Additional Fishery Information

Commercial Fishery – Utilization by the commercial groundfish fishery has been high, at over 90 percent in FYs 2023 and 2024, though appeared to decline in FY 2025 (Table 15).

Sectors – Table 16 compares the performance of the quota-change model (QCM) to realized outcomes for witch flounder since FY 2012. Performance of the QCM varies year to year (in some years it under-predicts, while in others it over-predicts). In recent years, the model has under-predicted catch and utilization as realized utilization increased, though the QCM over-predicted catch and utilization in FY 2025 when realized utilization declined (likely related to unique FY 2025 circumstances discussed above). The QCM trip selection pool generally consists of trips taken in two FYs prior (e.g. the FY2025 prediction drew from FY2023 trips). As a result, the fishery being represented in the model does not always translate to current fishing conditions on the water. Realized utilization rates for witch flounder are generally high and above 80 percent in most years, though were lower in FYs 2021 and 2022. Utilization increased dramatically in FY 2023 to 99 percent and 96 percent in FY 2024, but declined in FY 2025 to 66 percent. Revenue also increased from FY 2022, but was lower than previous years, suggesting lower ex-vessel prices for witch flounder beginning in FY 2023.

Annual catch entitlement (ACE) lease prices for witch flounder were estimated for FYs 2021-2025 using a hedonic price model (Figure 13). Input data into the model is comprised of inter-sector ACE leases over the FYs 2019-2023 period. Witch flounder quota traded from around \$0.10 to \$0.15 between FYs 2021-2023, before increasing dramatically to over \$0.50 in FYs 2024-2025 following high utilization rates.

Table 15- Recent commercial groundfish fishery catch and utilization for witch flounder.

	<i>Commercial Groundfish Fishery</i>		
	Sub-ACL (mt)	Total Catch (mt)	Utilization
FY2023	1,146.0	1,114.7	97.3%
FY2024	1,203.0	1,124.6	93.5%
FY2025 (preliminary)	1,475.9	944.0	64.0%

Source: Multispecies FY2023 and FY2024 Year-End Final Catch Reports; FY2025 Quota Monitoring, GARFO.

Table 16- Quota Change Model results for witch flounder.

	FY	Sector sub-ACL	Catch (mt)		Utilization (%)		Gross Rev (\$mil, 2025)	
			Realized	Predicted	Realized	Predicted	Realized	Predicted
Witch Flounder	2012	1,426	981	573	0.69	0.29	5.5	4.0
	2013	599	639	694	1.07	0.93	4.4	3.7
	2014	598	514	591	0.86	0.98	3.7	3.3
	2015	596	523	526	0.88	0.88	3.6	3.6
	2016	362	351	310	0.97	0.86	2.6	2.1
	2017	718	487	449	0.68	0.63	2.7	3.4
	2018	812	794	481	0.98	0.58	3.5	3.4
	2019	831	761	651	0.92	0.78	3.5	3.6
	2020	1,275	893	872	0.7	0.68	3.7	3.5
	2021	1,273	843	716	0.66	0.56	3.5	3.2
	2022	1,278	792	919	0.62	0.72	2.8	3.7
	2023	1,104	1,095	824	0.99	0.74	3.3	3.3
	2024	1,162	1,115	939	0.96	0.85	3.4	2.8
	2025	1,422	931	978	0.66	0.69	3.2	2.8

Figure 13- Estimated intersector ACE lease prices for witch flounder.

