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New England Fishery Management Council

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DRAFT MEETING SUMMARY

Habitat Plan Development Team

Webinar

June 17, 2026

2:00-4:00 p.m.

The Habitat Plan Development Team (PDT) met via webinar at 2:00 p.m. on June 17, 2026 to hear the Habitat Advisory Panel and Committee recommendations on the Dedicated Habitat Research Area (DHRA) sunset review and the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (GSC HMA) clam exemption program evaluation, and to discuss progress that had been made by staff towards assembling information for the program evaluation. The PDT also received updates on the 2026 Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) work. These included recent adjustments to inshore and continental slope mapping methods; modeling work for scallops, halibut, offshore hake, and wolffish; and the outreach plans and schedule for the framework. Staff also shared Whiting PDT and Habitat Committee feedback on the draft EFH designations. Finally the PDT discussed a process for providing input on regional seafloor mapping priorities and strategized around approaches for developing comments on offshore mineral mining.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Michelle Bachman (PDT Chair), Julian Garrison, and Jennifer Couture (NEFMC); Melissa Smith (Habitat Committee Chair); Sharon Benjamin, Sabrina Pereira (NMFS GARFO); Dr. Peter Auster (University of Connecticut); Tori Kentner (MAFMC); Dr. Chris Haak (Monmouth University); Julia Livermore (Rhode Island DEM, DMF); Dr. Fiona Hogan (RODA). In addition, six other people attended.

KEY OUTCOMES

- The PDT noted that a DHRA designation with a known duration (i.e., review on a three-year cycle) is useful when seeking external funding for research.
- The PDT discussed information used to support EFH conservation recommendations related to cod spawning in Southern New England, and how these studies could be applied to the clam exemption program review.
- The PDT agreed the surfclam exemption review report should be clear about where there are gaps in our knowledge and if there are approaches that could be taken to filling them. For example, the acoustic array used to detect spawning cod in the Southern New England wind energy lease areas could potentially be expanded to cover Nantucket Shoals.
- PDT members agreed to coordinate on developing a response to NROC's request for regional seafloor mapping priorities and identified past recommendations that will be revisited in the coming weeks to support the current round of recommendations.
- The PDT noted that there is lots of information available to support Council comments on offshore mineral mining and suggested reviewing comments recently submitted in response to Request for Information notices in the Pacific.

AGENDA ITEM #1 – DEDICATED HABITAT RESEARCH AREA EVALUATION

Council staff gave a presentation summarizing the Habitat Committee's recommendations related to DHRAs and describing what information would be provided to the Council. This included a review of overlapping management areas to the Stellwagen DHRA in the western Gulf of Maine region.

The PDT asked about the timeframe for reviewing fishing restrictions associated with the Western Gulf of Maine Groundfish and Habitat Closures, wondering if the Stellwagen DHRA were to sunset, when restrictions in that location might change. Staff responded that while the exact timing would depend on the Council prioritizing a review or a management action, the idea from Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2 (OHA2) was that all spatial management measures in that action would be reviewed around 2028 at the ten-year mark. The PDT noted that from a scientific program management and funding perspective, if there is uncertainty about underlying conditions that support a research project, such as the fishing restrictions within the DHRA, this could raise questions from external funders as they review research proposals. This comment was based on prior experiences applying for funding. Staff noted that the Advisory Panel asked whether DHRAs specifically aid in research permit review at the Regional Office. The response received was that the DHRA designation was helpful but not necessary for permitting, such as under an Exempted Fishing Permit. The PDT noted that even if it is understood amongst Council process participants that the fishing restrictions in the Stellwagen DHRA/WGOM Habitat/Groundfish closures would not be changed without substantial Council discussion and review, external reviewers and funders might not be familiar with these issues. Thus, the clarity of purpose associated with a DHRA designation would be valuable to communicate Council intent.

The PDT asked for clarification about the question "are fishing restrictions an explicit part of the project design". Staff noted that this question would be asked when discussing an ongoing or future planned research project in a DHRA in the context of a three-year sunset review. They noted that the challenge here is determining whether the Council intended to examine DHRAs separately from other management areas, or if overlapping management areas could be considered when determining the ongoing necessity of a DHRA designation. Another point raised is that if the Stellwagen DHRA was removed, even though fishing restrictions would not change given other overlapping areas, there would no longer be a DHRA area formally designated to serve as a focal point for research. OHA2 and its implementing regulations speak to retaining or removing DHRAs during the sunset review, not to maintaining them but modifying fishing restrictions.

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

Council staff gave a presentation recapping the scope of the review and key questions and shared the Advisory Panel and Committee recommendations for information to include and how to frame that information (i.e., as a focus of the review vs. contextual support). They also updated the PDT on what information was already available or forthcoming, and when it would be received. They asked for PDT input on the question of whether spawning cod occur, or are likely to occur, in or near the exemption areas, noting that it might be helpful to describe recent environmental conditions on Nantucket Shoals during the spawning season to assess whether conditions are suitable for cod.

The PDT noted that it would be useful to call attention to the cod spawning research in Southern New England (SNE), even though the acoustic array does not cover the exemption areas or habitat management areas, since this approach could be used to gather evidence for cod spawning in the HMA.

Gabriella Feil, GARFO HESD staff, shared the studies they reference when making conservation recommendations related to cod spawning in SNE. She noted that spawning has been observed in depths of 50 m or shallower, and that recently the acoustic glider survey has been expanded further east towards Nantucket Shoals, which leads them to hypothesize that the shoals could still be spawning habitat for cod. She suggested reaching out to Drs. Van Hoeck and Van Parijs directly for more information.

AGENDA ITEM #3 – 2026 EFH UPDATES

Council staff gave a presentation on current work related to the 2026 framework. Scallop, halibut, offshore hake, and wolffish models are all in progress. During May and June, staff have been working with GARFO and MAFMC staff to refine the approach and make inshore EFH smoother / more continuous to better support consultations. The need to add slope depth ranges was identified and planned during development of the 2025 framework, but the details of the workflow were only fully established while creating the final EFH maps. The methods for the 2025 and 2026 species maps are the same.

Ms. Kentner said she hopes to relaunch the updated R-Shiny EFH demonstration mapping application by the end of the week. Council staff will share updates on the last four species when provided by Dr. Haak, and are documenting final mapping methods to include with the frameworks.

AGENDA ITEM #4 – OCEAN PLANNING

Council staff shared that the Northeast Regional Ocean Council is currently in the midst of habitat mapping prioritization process and asked for PDT input to support the Council's engagement in the process. They also asked for any information that would support future preparation of Council comments on offshore mineral mining, since a request for information is expected to be published by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management in the coming months. They also pointed out the Ocean Planning slides presented at the June 12 Habitat Committee meeting, in case PDT members wanted a current summary of the other issues they are tracking for the Council.

GARFO and NEFSC staff are in the process of developing comments on the mapping priorities and agreed it would be useful to include Council staff in those discussions. A PDT member noted that they had developed recommendations as part of a similar exercise about six years ago, and that they were not seeing all their input from that exercise reflected in the current request.

On the mining issue, the PDT noted that comments on this topic were recently submitted in response to requests for information in other regions (e.g., American Samoa, Gulf of Alaska). These comments would be a good information source for staff. The PDT confirmed that the mining proposals would be for federal (i.e., outer continental shelf) waters.

Staff wondered if there was new or forthcoming information describing deep-sea coral and sponge habitats that should be referenced in any Council comments. A PDT member noted that Martha Nizinski has been updating descriptions of corals and other resources in the canyons off the northeast shelf.

Staff also noted the Council's policies on offshore development topics. Mineral mining is a newer issue for the Council, but development of a policy is likely outside of what can be accomplished this year. Staff will plan to compile resources used to develop comments and will consider how to share information with the Committee and Council.

Follow-Ups (all agenda topics):

- Schedule meeting to discuss mapping priorities (NOAA staff, Couture, Bachman)
- Review mining comments from other regions (Couture)
- Schedule follow up meeting(s) on EFH and clam exemption review topics, coordinating the later with Natalie Jennings at CFF (Bachman)
- Share updates on SDM and map development for scallops, halibut, offshore hake, and wolffish as they become available (Garrison, Haak)
- Add refined EFH mapping methods to EFH methods document (Garrison, Kentner)
- Share updated R Shiny EFH application when relaunched (Kentner, Garrison)
- Check with R. Van Hoeck and S. Van Parijs about any recent data from the SNE acoustic array related to cod spawning activity (Bachman)
- Compile information resources on offshore mineral mining (Couture)

The meeting adjourned at approximately 3:45 p.m.