New England Fishery Management Council
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MEETING SUMMARY

Habitat Plan Development Team

Webinar
July 21, 2025
1:00-4:30 p.m.

The Habitat Plan Development Team (PDT) met via webinar at 1:00 p.m. on July 21, 2025 to discuss Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) designations (maps and text descriptions) including: (1) a recap of the approach and timeline for designation updates; (2) reviewing maps, model outputs, text descriptions, and feedback received to date for each of the ten species slated for EFH updates in 2025; (3) recommending a package of supplementary information (model outputs) to be provided as a companion to the EFH designations; (4) next steps for the EFH Framework; (5) an Ocean Planning update; and (6) a response to Executive Order (E.O.) 14276 (*Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness*). There were no additions or changes to the agenda.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Michelle Bachman (PDT Chair), Jennifer Couture, and Julian Garrison (NEFMC); Sharon Benjamin and Sabrina Pereira (NMFS/GARFO); David Packer (NMFS/NEFSC); Julia Livermore (Rhode Island DEM, DMF); Anne Simpson (Maine DMR); Dr. Fiona Hogan (RODA); and Melissa Smith (Committee Chair). Tori Kentner (MAFMC) and Chris Haak (Monmouth University) were invited to participate in the meeting. In addition, about 8 other people attended.

KEY OUTCOMES

- The PDT continued to refine EFH designation methods and resulting draft designations and agreed on a series of next steps for continued work.
- The PDT discussed ancillary / supplementary information and how it relates to the official EFH designation; the PDT identified a need for follow up discussions on this subject.
- The PDT agreed that it would be useful to share ocean planning updates like those received at this meeting with the Committee and Advisory Panel and to solicit input from members of those groups on the frequency and level of detail of those updates.
- The PDT discussed the Council's E.O. 14276 response and did not recommend any habitat actions to include in the list of workplan items.

AGENDA ITEM #1: EFH DESIGNATION APPROACH RECAP

Council staff gave a brief presentation recapping the model-based approach for updating EFH maps, the timeline for the 2025 EFH Framework, and updates on map troubleshooting and designations feedback meetings with species PDTs and Advisory Panels (APs). Notably, staff intend to streamline the framework document by drafting a single action alternative to adopt EFH updates for all 2025 species. Artifacts (small unexpectedly mapped areas) are occurring along the inshore edge of the smooth skate EFH footprint and in the northern part of the juvenile clearnose skate EFH footprint. Dr. Haak explained the tradeoffs between different model extrapolation approaches for estimating density beyond areas where

particular species are captured in various surveys. He is continuing to review these methods and will follow up with the PDT during August to share progress.

Ms. Kentner also provided an update on a method for refining the estuarine portions of EFH footprints, with the intent to implement it by the end of August. PDT members appreciated the new approach and clarified methodological details. Currently, inshore occurrences turn on whole estuaries, but this is likely more inclusive than is biologically realistic. Ms. Kentner has combined spatial data on salinity and depth to define estuarine zones and is comparing the occurrence of fish in survey data to the identified zones. These zones end at the mouth of each estuary. This will enable mapping at the sub-estuary level that reflects the conditions suitable for a species and lifestage. In parallel, she is using nearshore survey data (inside and outside estuaries, including species catches and corresponding environmental parameters) to identify temperature, salinity, depth, and dissolved oxygen thresholds for each species. Thus far, these thresholds appear consistent with the SDM results. These refinements that lead to more specific EFH maps are expected to benefit the EFH consultation process. Final maps will still include a 3 km buffer to ensure that EFH areas are not missed due to the spatial resolution of the coastline data used for mapping as compared to the true shape of the coastline.

The PDT also encouraged Council staff to simplify the information contained in EFH designation feedback requests to the species PDTs and APs. Council staff noted that they plan to use feedback and reflections from this year to refine and streamline the framework development process going forward, particularly for the remaining New England species slated for EFH updates in 2026 and 2027. Staff noted that the timing and process could be adjusted from this year's framework.

Public Comment:

- There were no comments from the public on this agenda item.

AGENDA ITEM #2: EFH DESIGNATIONS PROGRESS AND FEEDBACK

Council staff reviewed the draft updated EFH designations (maps, text, and supplemental model outputs) as well as feedback received to date from species PDTs and APs. The PDT discussed whether it is useful to specify key habitat areas within the broader EFH footprints and how the text descriptions can be consistent in the language used to describe specific locations and preferred environmental conditions. Generally, the PDT agreed that environmental predictors that have ecological basis in the literature should be referenced in the text.

PDT members generally appreciated the level of specificity in the draft text descriptions and encouraged consistency across New England-managed species and between Councils (e.g., NPFMC, MAFMC). The PDT also discussed ways to examine recent trends in predicted species density at finer temporal scales (e.g., annual, seasonal, or monthly) to respond to feedback from monkfish and herring groups. Council staff then led a review of the updated EFH maps and text for each of the ten 2025 species, including recommendations for using other lifestage maps as proxies for eggs and larvae.

Atlantic cod:

- PDT members noted the very general text description for eggs. The PDT suggested adding a note referring readers to the adult text descriptions, which include a description of spawning locations for additional information about where eggs may occur.
- The PDT also discussed ways to use data from the model outputs to inform descriptions of preferred ranges / thresholds for environmental conditions.

Atlantic herring:

- The PDT suggested cross-referencing the figures showing variance partitioning with the literature to identify ecologically relevant model predictors worth mentioning in the text descriptions.

Monkfish:

- Monkfish habitat use is likely changing, driven by shifts in temperature. The fishery used to be most active in the fall, but this is no longer the case. Fishing has shifted later in the year, into early winter, and further offshore.
- One PDT member suggested focusing additional engagement with monkfish PDT and/or AP members on recent trends in the fishery. They also encouraged staff to reach out to individuals directly, which would likely be more effective than engaging with the full AP via correspondence.
- The PDT member also noted two ongoing projects examining catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) and offered to pass along data as reference points.

Skates complex:

- Council staff noted that the skate species will use adult (or combined) maps as proxies for the egg maps. Consequently, the egg text descriptions for each skate species are similar. There is limited information on reproduction for many skates.
- The PDT discussed how the modeling approach across species causes survey-related artifacts to appear, especially for juvenile clearnose skates (see agenda item #1).
- The PDT also suggested noting in the framework document which occurrence thresholds (i.e., 75th or 90th percentile) are used for the current EFH designations, since these exact thresholds differed across species. For the updated designations, the threshold is consistent across species (95th percentile but also see below discussion on core EFH). Clarifying these thresholds in the document should aid comparison between current and updated maps across species.

Currently, Dr. Haak has produced maps showing the 20-year trend in density by model grid cell. These trends fit a simple linear regression to the predicted density values in each cell. Other approaches might be useful, such as producing the same plots but separately for the first and second halves of the 20-year time series. The group agreed that continuing to show these trends spatially was preferable to generating statistics that represent overall changes in density, integrating across the species range. Such estimates could easily be confounded with stock assessment results.

The PDT also discussed including references to core EFH areas in the text descriptions. Core EFH is a term borrowed from the North Pacific Fishery Management Council that refers to the subset of model prediction grids that represent the top 50% of density values. They were the first Council to use species distribution models for their EFH designations, and their documentation refers to the grids representing the top 25% of the distribution as EFH hotpots (a PDT member wondered if the term hotspot would be confused with bycatch hotspots, or multispecies biodiversity hotspots). The PDT acknowledged the concern about seeming to create two levels of EFH, the general designation vs. core, but commented that showing the core areas feels consistent with the desire to move toward higher levels of data (relative abundance by habitat type being level 2). The PDT suggested being clear about the Council's intent for identifying the core areas, for example, should NOAA prioritize core areas during EFH consultations? The team agreed that a conversation with Council and NOAA staff from the North Pacific region would be valuable, including to understand whether and how their consultation staff are differentiating core areas from the broader designation. There could be confusion with the concept of Habitat Area of Particular Concern vs. core areas.

Public Comment:

- There were no comments from the public on this agenda item.

AGENDA ITEM #3: SUPPLEMENTARY PACKAGE OF EFH INFORMATION

Council staff reviewed a list of multispecies and single species model outputs that can be provided as part of a package of supplementary information. Generally, the PDT agreed that the list of products shared thus far would be informative to share. Some explanatory text should accompany the overall model diagnostics and goodness of fit measures. Multispecies plots should focus on NEFMC species only for the purposes of the framework (plots with all regional species would be appropriate for the Northeast Regional Habitat Assessment application). Staff suggested compiling plots into an appendix for the purpose of the framework and working with MAFMC staff afterwards on sharing the information online, such as via an R-Shiny application.

Public Comment:

- There were no comments from the public on this agenda item.

AGENDA ITEM #4: NEXT STEPS FOR EFH FRAMEWORK

Council staff walked through the framework document outline and the PDT thought the outline seemed complete / reasonable. The PDT agreed that a follow-up meeting to review analyses including a summary of fishing effects relative to the updated designations would be valuable, and staff will poll for late August.

Public Comment:

- There were no comments from the public on this agenda item.

AGENDA ITEM #5: OCEAN PLANNING UPDATE

Council staff provided a brief update on the following ocean planning issues, and took questions from the PDT:

- Offshore wind related updates – multiple projects are under construction, various science and monitoring efforts are underway.
- New England Shelf Hydrogeology – coring project, aiming to explore extent of freshwater and previous glaciation. This project is nearing completion and involves multiple institutions.
- WHOI LOC-NESS Project – testing carbon capture technology and potential environmental effects. The site is located in Wilkison Basin, as shown on the Northeast Ocean Data Portal.
- Oil / gas leasing – Council sent a comment letter against this type of activity in New England, in response to the Trump administration's review of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management's Five-Year Offshore Oil and Gas Leasing Program.
- Staff noted that deep sea mining is likely not an issue in our region, although sand mining was raised as a possible issue of interest during the EFH review and is a topic that staff plan to keep up to date on.

The PDT discussed whether it would be useful to bring similar updates to the Committee and Advisory Panel, at meetings, via email, or both. Generally, this seems like it would be valuable, especially if we want to facilitate discussion around 2026 priorities and staff work related to these issues. During the EFH Review, the Council did not recommend developing any new policies related to non-fishing activities, but the current administration's priorities differ from prior ones, which might provide an impetus for the Council to engage more actively in developing policy statements for issues like ocean mining or carbon capture.

AGENDA ITEM #6: OTHER BUSINESS AND NEXT STEPS

Council staff shared plans for responding to Executive Order (E.O.) 14276 *Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness*, issued on April 17. Staff, PDT, and AP input across the FMPs is due August 15, and the

Council's compiled responses are due September 30. The Council will need to commit to a work plan for completing any items identified.

Habitat regulations generally include habitat management areas (HMAs) that are closed to selected gears, often mobile bottom-tending gears but sometimes fixed gears as well. The Great South Channel Habitat Management Area includes exemption areas within it where clam and mussel dredges can be used. Generally, reducing the size of HMAs, removing HMAs, or establishing additional exemption areas within HMAs would improve access to fishing grounds, consistent with one of the goals of the E.O.

Staff noted that some other Councils seem likely to suggest some of these types of changes in response to the E.O. The Habitat PDT did not offer any recommendations for actions that the Council might consider undertaking at this time.

Dave Packer shared that there are two upcoming research cruises that are partly focused on deep-sea corals and might be of interest to the PDT. One will include telepresence, and staff can share a link when available. Mr. Packer can share outcomes and highlights with the PDT towards the end of the year.

Public Comment:

- There were no comments from the public on this agenda item.

Follow-Ups:

- **Kentner:** Continue refining estuarine EFH footprint methods.
- **Bachman, Garrison, Kentner:** Schedule small group or follow-up PDT meeting to continue developing estuarine EFH footprint methods, as needed.
- **Garrison, Bachman:** Develop and share simplified EFH designations feedback document, based on Habitat PDT feedback, for additional consultations with species PDT / AP members.
- **Haak:** Continue troubleshooting model artifacts causing unusual inshore predictions and resulting EFH footprints for smooth and clearnose skate.
- **Cournane:** Follow up on request for IBS data to support cod, herring designations.
- **Bachman, Garrison:** Coordinate with North Pacific Council, Mid-Atlantic Council, and GARFO staff on using detailed SDM outputs in EFH designations and consultations.
- **Garrison, Bachman:** Continue drafting and refining EFH text descriptions.
- **Garrison, Haak:** Develop methods to identify preferred environmental thresholds (e.g., temperature, depth, salinity) from cumulative distributions.
- **Haak:** Generate figures highlighting early (2000-2010) vs. recent (2011-2019) trends in predicted species density.
- **Haak:** Update multispecies plots to show NEFMC species only.
- **Haak:** Draft text describing overall model diagnostics/fit.
- **Bachman, Garrison:** Compile final multispecies and individual species plots into an appendix.
- **Bachman, Garrison:** Draft framework, working with Haak and Kentner on data and analyses.
- **Bachman:** Request PDT review of framework sections as they are developed.
- **Bachman:** Poll for August PDT meeting.
- **PDT:** Reach out to staff with questions or ideas related to E.O. 14276.
- **Bachman:** Share Hudson Canyon research cruise information with the PDT when available.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 4:30 p.m.