New England Fishery Management Council
50 WATER STREET | NEWBURYPORT, MASSACHUSETTS 01950 | PHONE 978 465 0492
Daniel Salerno, *Chair* | Cate O'Keefe, PhD, *Executive Director*

DRAFT MEETING SUMMARY

Habitat Plan Development Team

Webinar
August 13, 2026
1:00-3:00 p.m.

The Habitat Plan Development Team (PDT) met via webinar at 1 p.m. on August 13, 2026 to receive updates on (1) the 2026 Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Designation Framework and (2) the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (GSC HMA) Surfclam Exemption Program Review. There were no changes to the agenda.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: PDT members included Michelle Bachman (PDT Chair), Sharon Benjamin (NMFS GARFO), Jessica Coakley (MAFMC), Jennifer Couture (NEFMC), Julian Garrison (NEFMC), Dr. Fiona Hogan (Triton Research Institute), and Julia Livermore (Rhode Island DEM, DMF). Dr. Chris Haak (Monmouth University) attended in support of the EFH discussion. Other GARFO staff: Gabby Feil, Doug Christel, Sue Tuxbury, and Thomas Heimann (NOAA GARFO). In addition, eight other people attended.

KEY OUTCOMES

- The PDT received updates on the 2026 Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Designation Framework, including quantile map updates for Atlantic halibut, Atlantic wolffish, and offshore hake as well as guidance from GARFO EFH consultations staff on implementing scientific and industry expert feedback-based map adjustments.
- Council staff have made the draft framework and appendices available for review as a SharePoint link in this meeting's agenda and will also include a PDF draft for review at the upcoming joint Habitat Advisory Panel (AP) and Committee meeting on August 20 in New Bedford (and via webinar), where a preferred alternative will be recommended. Following the AP and Committee meeting, staff will incorporate feedback and prepare the framework documents for Council review and final action at its September meeting.
- The PDT received updates on the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area Surfclam Exemption Program Review Report and provided feedback on specific analyses and ways to present the information in the report. PDT members supported the direction of the review analyses as well as the proposed next steps for the report. Staff will review the report at the AP and Committee meeting and at the September Council meeting, before incorporating feedback and finalizing in advance of the December priorities discussion.
- Following the AP and Committee meeting, staff will flag needed updates to the EFH Framework and Surfclam Exemption Review Report documents based on AP and Committee and re-circulate them to the PDT for review (Friday, August 21).

AGENDA REVIEW AND PLANNING FOR FUTURE MEETINGS

The chair reviewed the agenda and the schedule for upcoming meetings including the joint Habitat Advisory Panel and Committee meeting on August 20th in New Bedford, MA and the September 15-17 Council meeting in Plymouth, MA. The Council is expected to review the GSC HMA Surfclam Exemption Program Review Report and recommend a final preferred alternative for the 2026 EFH Designation Framework during the September Council meeting.

AGENDA ITEM #1 – 2026 ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT FRAMEWORK UPDATES

Council staff provided updates on the development of the 2026 Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Designation Framework, which included newly available quantile maps for the three data-limited species (Atlantic halibut, Atlantic wolffish and offshore hake) and a follow-up conversation with GARFO EFH consultations staff on suggested map adjustments based on scientific and industry expert feedback. Staff summarized feedback from GARFO staff, noting generally that changes to the northern and/or southern extent of EFH designations are important to consider in the context of inshore EFH consultations because the updated designations may flag additional areas not currently designated, or eliminate areas formerly designated and consulted on. Deferring to model-based and/or inshore analyses is generally preferable (including for "gaps" in the EFH designation due to low density predictions). However, specific, ad-hoc map adjustments suggested by scientific and industry experts may be reasonable if well-supported by data and/or literature. Large-scale adjustments to the maps or methods (additional or alternate data inputs, modeling approaches, etc.) would be more appropriate to consider for the next EFH 5-Year Review. As one example of a spatial gap in the model-based EFH map, Dr. Haak asked for clarification on feedback received regarding the lack of mapped EFH on the top of Stellwagen Bank for American plaice life stages. In this instance, the draft EFH maps for juvenile and adults retains the model-based footprint which does not include the top of Stellwagen Bank. For species with data uncertainty or where currently considered data sources do not capture distributions well, GARFO staff suggested considering a more conservative quantile threshold (e.g., using the top 95%, rather than top 75%).

Staff reviewed an update to the mapping workflow for relatively rare species / life stages and the resulting quantile maps for Atlantic halibut, Atlantic wolffish, and offshore hake. For most modeled species in the 2025 and 2026 EFH updates, density quantiles are calculated and ranked within the "occupied habitat" area, which includes grid cells with ≥ 5% encounter probability (i.e., trimming out any cells with < 5% encounter probability). However, for relatively rare species, this approach may be biased by underrepresenting the spatial extent of the habitat area footprint. To address this, Dr. Haak used the cumulative proportion of density to constrain the area in which density quantiles are calculated; this approach trims out cells that cumulatively contribute < 5% of the life stage's total estimated abundance and should conceptually be more representative of habitat for adult halibut and wolffish. For juveniles, and for both life stages of offshore hake, there are sufficient data to use the 5% encounter probability approach. Dr. Haak also emphasized that this approach does not change the underlying modeling methods (i.e., longline-trawl integrated) for adult halibut and wolffish; rather, it is a different way of presenting the model outputs that helps account for situations where model-predicted counts < 1 lead to very low encounter probability for these rarer life stages. Staff also noted feedback from the stock assessment lead for wolffish that, given the pronounced decline in wolffish abundance since ~2005, the map using the 5% encounter probability approach still seemed more representative for adults. GARFO staff requested to examine the model outputs for wolffish to compare the two approaches and reiterated the earlier suggestion for designations to err on the more conservative side when lacking information.

AGENDA ITEM #2 – GREAT SOUTH CHANNEL HABITAT MANAGEMENT AREA SURFCLAM EXEMPTION PROGRAM REVIEW

Council staff provided updates on the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (GSC HMA) Surfclam Exemption Program Review and sought feedback on the information and analyses in the draft report. Sections in the report on background context, management background, and EFP-based research project timelines are generally in good shape, and staff started to have conversations with industry

stakeholders to gain their perspectives from working in and around the research areas. For example, prior to the HMA closure, fishermen had seen many juveniles and expected to see large densities of adults from those year classes in Davis Bank East. However, since the closure and fishing in the exemption areas, these adults were not found, highlighting how challenging population dynamics can be to assess and predict. Staff intend to continue such conversations and discussions with captains and at the joint Habitat AP and Committee meeting on August 20th and will broadly characterize those perspectives in the report prior to Council review in September. Staff also noted that there had been discussions on the GSC HMA and surfclam exemption area at the Mid-Atlantic Council's August meeting (August 11-13); while a motion on this specific issue did not end up passing, the PDT encouraged summarizing key points from that discussion for the Habitat AP and Committee.

Council staff then outlined key questions, relevant information sources, and analyses in the review report. These included analyses of the following: (1) relative importance of GSC HMA and exemption areas as habitat for managed species (i.e., examining the top 25% and 50% EFH density quantiles as well as cumulative density quantiles, which account for relative abundance in ranking grid cells for quantiles), (2) looking for seasonal differences in habitat use, and (3) considering distribution shifts away from or onto Nantucket Shoals within the last 10 years. Staff sought feedback from the PDT on whether this approach generally makes sense (i.e., addresses the goals of the review) and whether there are additional information sources or questions to consider. Dr. Haak noted that predicted density trends maps from the SDM outputs are simplified depictions but could be a useful, preliminary exploration for species of interest; other products considered for the Ecosystem Component Inflation Reduction Act project could also be useful depending on the spatial scale. Dr. Haak suggested piloting any analyses with a few select species before committing to a more extensive analysis, which the PDT generally agreed with. Staff proposed an inverted pyramid approach to examining habitat use in the HMA, which categorizes SDM-estimated densities for species from no use of the HMA to increasingly greater predicted densities/habitat importance. PDT members appreciated this approach and suggested including both the pyramid graphic and table in the review report. The PDT also discussed whether this approach should include pelagic species, given that clam dredges mainly prosecute benthic habitats. PDT members noted that some pelagic species use the entire water column (e.g., squids), and GARFO staff noted that there could be indirect effects on pelagic species that have ecological interactions with affected demersal species. Council staff suggested that it could make sense to focus on managed, demersal species but a more extensive analysis that includes pelagic species and potential indirect effects could support a management action if prioritized by the Council.

Staff led a brief discussion on the Fishing Effects analysis and cod spawning analysis sections of the report. The Fishing Effects analysis builds on work done for the 2025 joint MAFMC / NEFMC EFH 5-Year Review, focusing on modeled clam dredge disturbance impacts in the HMA vs the Northeast region as a whole. Staff noted these analyses can be presented as mean disturbance in maps, figures, or tables in the report and can also revisit similar analyses from the discontinued Northern Edge action (which also examined minimum and maximum disturbance). Staff proposed grouping analyses by years and/or months corresponding to periods prior to and after enactment of the HMA (e.g., June 2015 vs 2018 vs 2021) but could potentially examine even earlier years as well. Staff also plan to compare Fishing Effects disturbance estimates with the fishing effects analysis in the recently completed Coonamessett Farm Foundation EFP report. Regarding cod spawning, staff intend to clean up figures in the report and follow up with NEFSC staff on the possibility of future data analyses, which could be useful to inform the Council's December priorities discussion or a potential follow-up action.

Staff concluded with next steps for the report, including (1) framing the report as putting finer details on information that has been available since the Clam Dredge Framework as well as incorporating more recent information, and (2) summarizing overall findings and key takeaways:

- GSC HMA is a highly dynamic, spatially heterogeneous area in oceanographic and habitat conditions (per EFP report and other literature). It is difficult to assume the bottom in one

exemption area will be the same as in another area. Additionally, from fishing effort data and EFPs, fishing and the clam resource can be variable as well.
- Given heterogeneity in habitat and clam distributions, and given the lack of a fine-scale, annual clam survey, designing a revised spatial management program for the area similar to what already exists (smaller exemptions from larger closed area) would be challenging. This work would also need more conversations and public process, etc.
- Declines in regionwide surfclam harvest prior to HMA and exemption program, but a more pronounced decline in harvests from HMA in recent years, suggests program is not providing scale of fishing opportunities that can support a larger fishery.

Following the Habitat AP and Committee discussion on August 20, Council staff plan to revisit the discussion and conclusion section, flag other necessary revisions, and send the report to the PDT for review before the Council meeting mailing deadline. PDT members generally appreciated the work put into the review report and thought the next steps sounded reasonable.

Public Comment:

- **Shaun Gehan (Counsel for the Saving Surfclam Coalition)** asked whether the Surfclam Exemption Program Review Report will include information on any impacts to the surfclam fishery, emphasizing that the Council is tasked with determining whether surfclam dredging is having adverse effects on EFH, and whether the current approach to minimizing impacts is practicable within the meaning of the Magnuson Stevens Act. Council staff directed Mr. Gehan to the Habitat PDT meeting on August 4, where the PDT reviewed the harvest data, and noted that the report will also refer to prior Council actions on determining whether dredge gear has adverse effects on habitat. However, staff noted that the threshold of impacts that would spur the Council to adjust management in the HMA is more of a policy question, whereas the review report intends to describe some of the tradeoffs. Staff encouraged Mr. Gehan and others to engage in the upcoming AP and Committee discussion.

Follow-Ups (all agenda topics):

- **Bachman** – Continue preparing Great South Channel Habitat Management Area Surfclam Exemption Program Review Report for PDT, AP, and Committee review (to be shared out with AP / CTE meeting materials; also available as a SharePoint link from this meeting's agenda)
- **Garrison** – Continue preparing 2026 EFH Designation Framework document for PDT, AP, and Committee review (to be shared out with AP / CTE meeting materials; also available as a SharePoint link from this meeting's agenda)
- **Garrison / Bachman** – flag any needed updates or revisions to the EFH Framework and Surfclam Exemption Program Review Report documents after the August 20 AP / Committee meeting and re-circulate for PDT review

The meeting adjourned at approximately 2:20 p.m.