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New England Fishery Management Council

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MEETING SUMMARY

Small-Mesh Multispecies (Whiting) Advisory Panel and Committee

Warwick, RI and via Webinar

May 19, 2026

The Small-Mesh Multispecies (Whiting) Advisory Panel (AP) and Committee met jointly on May 19, 2026, in Warwick, RI and via webinar at 9:00 am to discuss:

- Work plan for 2026 management action, including plans for assessment update and risk policy factor scoring;
- Summary of the Plan Development Team's (PDT) April 1 data workshop meeting with the AP, including comments on recent fishery performance;
- Analyses of exemption area performance, red hake discard characteristics, and factors affecting whiting ex-vessel prices;
- Recommendations for management alternatives to be considered in a specifications action or framework adjustment; and,
- Other business, as necessary.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Jackie Odell (Whiting Committee Chair), Peter Aarrestad (Vice-Chair), Greg Hueth (MAFMC), Scott Olszewski, Mike Pierdinock, Ted Platz, Peter Whelan (Committee); Katie Almeida (AP Chair), Bonnie Brady, Dan Farnham Jr., Tom Testaverde Jr. (Advisory Panel); Andrew Applegate (FMP Coordinator), Emily Bodell, Mark Grant, Naresh Pradhan (Council Staff); Shannah Jaburek (NOAA/GARFO). In addition, about 3 other people attended.

KEY OUTCOMES:

- The Committee and AP received a summary of the April 1 AP/PDT data workshop, including a review of topics covered at the meeting, relevant follow-up analyses, and a discussion about recent fishery performance.
- The Committee recommended to the Council that the 2026 small mesh whiting action include measures that would set specifications for up to 5 years, consider application of risk policy in catch setting process, consider whether to modify red hake possession limits and accountability measure triggers, and make various adjustments to Exemption Areas.

AGENDA ITEM #1: SMALL-MESH MULTISPECIES MANAGEMENT PRIORITIES

Council staff provided an overview of the 2026 small-mesh multispecies action plan, including an action to set specifications for up to 5 years and other management measures. The Council will receive data updates for red and silver hake in August, which will be used to inform specifications. The Council is also working to revise its risk policy, and is expected to take final action in June.

The Committee Chair asked how the Z-score or factor weighting (part of the new Risk Policy) would compare to or integrate with the current P* values (25% for whiting and 40% for red hake) used in the

fishery management plan. Council staff explained that the Z-score may support the use of the current P* values, but if not, a framework would need to be initiated to make changes to P*. There was a question on whether fishery-dependent data would be included in the data update, and what information from the update could be used to determine recruitment for the risk policy. Council staff noted that the data update will likely include reported landings and estimated discards, but size frequency data from the commercial fishery is not generally examined outside of a formal assessment. For recruitment, the PDT can look at survey data to estimate abundance of age 0s and 1s or examine size ranges and trends over time in the survey.

AGENDA ITEM #2: FISHERY ANALYSES

Whiting Prices and Imports

Council staff presented key conclusions from an analysis of domestic whiting prices and imports. A Committee member asked if there was any information on fish that is exported to Canada for processing and then shipped back to the US, and about the role of the USDA Office of Seafood. The AP Chair noted that the office is just getting started and staff stated that this detailed shipment information is not available through normal channels. An Advisor asked if the analysis was focused on east coast whiting or if it included Pacific whiting, and felt that an east coast-specific analysis is needed, noting the impacts of Canadian imports on the fresh fish market in the northeast. Staff confirmed that Pacific whiting or hake were included in the price analysis. Staff had communicated with some dealers in New York City, who stated that there have been market shifts away from domestic fresh fish markets, due to changes in demographics. An Advisor explained that the fresh whiting market in New England isn't compatible with the global commodity market because there is limited processing capacity. Fresh Canadian imports generally enter the market when the price is high, and are a major factor in reducing the price. There is no size differential between imports and domestic products. The domestic whiting fishery does not have a Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification, which is a costly endeavor. This could be limiting some distribution, but an Advisor also noted that there is more of a fresh market for whiting, and if processing capacity was available, there could be more of a frozen market.

AGENDA ITEM #3: ADVISORY PANEL REPORT

The AP Chair summarized the AP discussion on recent fishery performance from the April 1 AP/PDT data workshop. A Committee member asked about skate bycatch and its effect on fishery performance. An Advisor explained that unless fishing with a specialized rope trawl to release skates at the bottom of the net, the whole bag will fill with skates, which makes the whiting in the net unmarketable. It is hard to get away from skates when fishing. Another Advisor noted that dogfish poses a similar challenge. There was a question about the discussion around raising the lobster bycatch allowance, and a Committee member noted that this could be challenging to change. An AP member stated that the lobster limits are 100 per day or 200 per trip, which differs from groundfish trip limits¹. Council staff noted that exemption area allowances often differ from other limits in regulation.

¹ The Federal non-trap possession limits for lobster are codified at [50 CFR 697.17\(a\)](#). Any vessel with any non-trap gear on board capable of catching lobsters, or, that fishes for, takes, catches, or harvests lobster, is limited to possessing 100 lobsters per day, up to a maximum of 500 lobsters for any one trip, unless otherwise restricted. The exemptions for the whiting fishery have more restrictive possession limits for lobster set by the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan. The Cultivator Shoal Whiting Fishery Exemption Area, and the Southern New England Exemption Area, are the only whiting exemptions that allow possession of lobster using small mesh. The lobster possession limit for the Cultivator Shoal exemption is up to 10 percent, by weight, of all other species on board or 200 lobsters (whichever is less). Other whiting exempted fisheries (including the MA exemption area) prohibit possession of lobster. See the [May 14, 2026, PDT memorandum](#) for a summary.

AGENDA ITEM #4: ADDITIONAL ANALYSES

Catch Specifications and Red Hake Catches

Council staff shared updates to the red hake landings and discards analysis initially presented at the April 1 data workshop. It showed that the vast majority of small- and large-mesh trips do not catch enough red hake to exceed the possession limits, yet most of the red hake are discarded anyway. The reason for discarding on nearly all observed trips was due to low market demand, prices often not paying for shipping costs. There are also different ways of on-deck handling of target species, such as squid, which limit or prohibit handling of more delicate red hake, particularly on longer trips. The one exception was observed trips taken in statistical areas 526 (SW Georges Bank) and 537 (Southern New England) on small-mesh trips targeting whiting and/or squid. Discarding for these trips were reported as being due to restrictive possession limits.

The AP Chair noted the high proportion of red hake catch discards, and asked if there were differences between the northern and southern areas. Staff explained that a high proportion of red hake are discarded in both areas due to market demand, and an Advisor stated that when they come across red hake, they land up to the limit and only discard if they go over the limit. There was some discussion about the Total Allowable Landings (TAL) trigger for red hake, which is currently 41%. The trigger has not occurred since 2021.

An Advisor asked about the health of the southern red hake biomass, noting that they have feared it becoming a choke species since it is hard to get away from them, though gear modifications for skates can also help avoid red hake recently. Council staff said that although the latest assessments and survey data did not indicate much rebuilding, the assessment data update may show otherwise when available.

Another Advisor asked about the status of southern red hake. Council staff stated that the stock status is currently overfished, with no overfishing occurring. The analytical assessment was replaced with an empirical assessment, using data up to 2022. The management track assessment informed the last specifications cycle, when the Council's recommended ABC was raised from the prior years' specifications, but was reduced by 25% by GARFO in accordance with the rebuilding plan. When the trigger is reached, the possession limit is reduced from 1,000 lb (600 lb for small-mesh gears) to 400 lb. An Advisor felt that the trigger value creates more discards. Another Advisor suggested looking into allowing rope trawls as a selective gear to help shed red hake (and skates), or allowing small-mesh fishermen to land 1,000 lb of red hake in the southern area. Council staff explained that the Council could declare the rope trawl as a selective gear through an action, or fishermen can petition the Regional Administrator to determine whether the rope trawl is a selective gear for this purpose and the Regional Administrator may grant an exemption under the existing plan. A petition would require commercial fishery data to support the proposal.

AGENDA ITEM #5: EXEMPTION AREA ANALYSES

Council staff reviewed information compiled regarding letter of authorization use to access small-mesh exemption areas, as well as bycatch allowances in the exemption areas. Staff also presented an analysis of small-mesh to large-mesh catch ratios on observed large-mesh trips (intended as an indicator of relative whiting to large-mesh groundfish abundance in lieu of fishing with small-mesh nets), including potential alternatives for changes to exemption areas as identified at the April 1 data workshop. These potential alternatives included two overlapping areas SW of the Cultivator Shoals area, an area NE of the Cultivator Shoals Area, a sliver area between Small-Mesh Area 2 and the Western Gulf of Maine closed area, and an expansion of the Raised Footrope Trawl area to the east of the Stellwagen Bank Area. All exhibited elevated whiting to large-mesh groundfish observed catch ratios since 2021, which were analyzed by ten-minute square and month.

Bycatch Allowances

The Committee Chair asked about the bycatch allowances for lobster. Council staff noted that a previous framework added possession of lobster and monkfish to the exemption areas to allow landings without encouraging vessels to rig gear incorrectly to catch them. Subsequent actions removed the possession limits for monkfish and lobster, but they were re-added to the raised footrope trawl areas after further analysis. Staff also discussed the process for developing bycatch allowances and why they may differ between areas, stating that NMFS looks at available data for each area to determine what the allowances should be.

An Advisor asked why the exemption areas are still so limited for non-regulated groundfish species. Council staff explained that the limits were likely informed by trips in the target fishery, as well as coordinating with plans managing other stocks to determine potential impacts. The Advisor voiced their support for turning incidentally caught species into landings instead of discards. The Committee Chair also noted that the exemption area bycatch allowances, implemented many years ago, are static but applied in a dynamic environment. Council staff noted that while there is a default 5% bycatch standard, the regulations allow for setting a different percentage through an action, though it may take longer than the proposed 2026 action. An Advisor suggested considering increasing the monkfish bycatch allowance for the Cultivator Shoal area and the lobster bycatch allowances. Council staff stated that lobsters are managed by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) and through federal regulation. Staff indicated that they would follow-up with ASMFC staff about the feasibility of changing the lobster bycatch allowances in the small-mesh multispecies exemption areas, so they are consistent with ASMFC lobster regulations.

Small-mesh to Large-mesh catch ratios

An Advisor asked Council staff which alternatives may be the most successful expansions. Staff explained that statistically, there may not be a significant difference between the Cultivator Shoal and Small-Mesh Area I expansions, and there may be some overlaps with seasons for other species if the Raised Footrope Trawl Area is expanded to the north. An Advisor supported extending the season of the Raised Footrope Trawl area, though Council staff noted caution about possible overlap with spawning periods for other species. The advisor suggested a more limited extension of the Raised Footrope Trawl Area season, avoiding spring spawning. There was a question about the time period used for the analysis (2021-2025), which was selected to capture the most recent data while maintaining a sample size large enough to avoid potential confidentiality issues.

AGENDA ITEM #6: POSSIBLE MANAGEMENT MEASURES FOR 2026 AND FUTURE ACTIONS

Council staff outlined potential measures to include in the 2026 management action. The Committee Chair noted that this is the first whiting action where the Council will consider setting specifications for up to 5 years, but that the Council is not required to set specifications for the full 5 years. Council staff explained that the PDT will provide recommendations for 5 years to present to the Scientific and Statistical Committee, and noted that the Council can initiate an action at any juncture to change specifications should data warrant such a change. Advisors relayed some potential management measures they would like to include in the 2026 action, including increasing the northern red hake possession limit, expanding Small Mesh Area I, matching the southern red hake possession limits for small-mesh and large-mesh trips, extending the season for the Raised Footrope Trawl Area into the winter, expanding the Cultivator Shoal exemption area to the SW, and revising the monkfish and lobster bycatch limits. Committee members supported including measures beyond setting specifications in the action if there was interest.

1. COMMITTEE MOTION: AARRESTAD/PIERDINOCK

The Whiting Committee recommends to the Council that the 2026 small mesh whiting action include measures that would 1) set specifications for up to five years, 2027-2031 2) consider

application of risk policy in catch setting process 3) consider a modification to red hake possession limit and AM trigger and 4) make various adjustments to Exemption Areas (boundaries, seasons, and consistency with bycatch thresholds) based upon analysis of large mesh-fishery catch ratios and other data.

Measures to be considered are specifications that are adjusted for risk factors that the Council has identified, adjusting the northern red hake possession limit from 3,000 to 5,000 lbs due to improved resource conditions, adjusting the southern red hake possession limit 600 to 1,000 lbs, adjusting the monkfish and lobster allowances for exemption area trips to be consistent with existing limits in other fisheries, consideration of exemption area expansion to the SW of the Cultivator Shoals Area and to the W of Small-Mesh Area II, and an extension of the raised footrope season to include January and February.

Discussion on Motion: The AP and Committee discussed some wordsmithing for the motion. A Committee member was hesitant about including revisions to the lobster bycatch allowances and was interested in more clarification around the allowances before pursuing. Staff noted that they could look into this process before the Council meeting.

COMMITTEE MOTION #1 CARRIED BY UNANIMOUS CONSENT.

AGENDA ITEM #6: OTHER BUSINESS

An Advisor was interested in determining if there are opportunities for exempted fishing permits (EFPs) or other ideas that would allow for increasing catch and decreasing regulatory discards through gear modification or another strategy.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:50 pm.