



## New England Fishery Management Council

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Eric Reid, *Chairman* | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

## MEETING SUMMARY

### Habitat Plan Development Team

September 20, 2021

1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

#### *Agenda*

The PDT discussed (1) final recommended updates to the Council's wind energy policy and (2) Northern Edge white paper progress to date and next steps. The recommended policy changes will be brought to the Habitat Committee for approval on October 26. The Committee is expected to forward the policy with revisions to the Council for approval at the December meeting.

#### *Meeting attendance*

PDT members included Michelle Bachman (Chair), Peter Auster, Sharon Benjamin, Jessica Coakley, Jenny Couture, Geret DePiper, Rachel Feeney, Julia Livermore, Dave Packer, David Stevenson, Alison Verkade, and Carl Wilson. Habitat Committee chair Eric Reid also attended. Other attendees included Kelly Whitmore, Melissa Smith, and Drew Minkiewicz.

#### *Discussion*

##### *Offshore Wind Policy*

A sub-group of the PDT updated the policy and drafted a memo to the Committee explaining the changes. The PDT discussed both documents.

There was a debate about whether to include the phrase “habitat conversion and loss”, vs. simplifying to just “habitat conversion”. On the one hand, conversion and loss could be simplified to just conversion – areas are not lost but rather changed from natural to artificial structures. In addition, the term conversion would include changes in sediment grain size composition and bedform characteristics that occur due to changes in flow regime. On the other hand, for organisms that depend on a certain type of habitat, if that habitat is converted, then from the organism's standpoint, it is indeed “lost”. Further, “loss” has a more negative tone than “conversion” which may be important to convey. A few edits to the policy were suggested –

- The importance of habitat continuity at various scales was emphasized. For example, what if a wind farms interrupt a natural migration pathway, or produce novel pathways/stepping stones from artificial reef effects?

## FINAL

- The importance of understanding both project-specific and regional scale impacts and issues, including cumulative effects, was emphasized.
- The distinction between cumulative effects of multiple projects vs. second order effects from one or more projects was noted. It would be useful to define first order vs. second order vs. cumulative effects, if not in the policy, in the memo, for clarity.

Some examples of second order effects to include in the memo include concentrating predators. Some examples of second order effects to include in the memo include the role and movement patterns of predators like black sea bass and pelagic predator. Scour protection and subsea components of towers can aggregate predators with associated movement patterns and trophic effects that extend beyond the physical footprint of these structures.

The PDT agreed it was best not to be too specific here, either in the policy itself or in developing extensive literature-based support for the concepts presented in the memo to the Committee. The scientific literature on these issues will continue to evolve and the intent is for the policy to be more general and therefore lasting as a guidance document.

Issues around changes to trophic interactions and the ecological implications of adding structures where they don't currently exist were raised by the PDT during the meeting; the language in the draft policy is broad enough to cover these issues.

The question of when monitoring should be done was also discussed – the importance of habitat monitoring before, during, and after construction was added in two different places. The related questions of who funds research (e.g., agencies, permit holders) and who is accountable for understanding effects are important, but these questions are not raised in the policy (perhaps they could be, but they seem to be beyond the scope and largely outside the Council's influence). Multiple stressors affect marine ecosystems – climate change, offshore wind projects, fishing, coastal development, etc. – not to mention that these systems are naturally variable. Without substantial and focused research efforts it will be difficult to parse out the effects of different stressors. The PDT suggested raising this issue of funding and coordinated efforts to understand cumulative effects with the Committee, to see if they felt that the language of the policy should be revised to somehow incorporate these issues.

The PDT observed that this policy includes both environmental and fishery concerns; this is consistent with the cable and aquaculture policies. Staff have not engaged directly with other PDTs to identify concerns or solicit input, but there is an opportunity for participation via the Committee process. Impacts to particular resources (e.g., scallops, which are largely sessile) are not discussed individually in the policy – is there a need to be more specific about scallop or other fishery-related concerns? The PDT noted the potential that impacts to other mobile species could emerge based changes in the distribution of predators as described above. Note that we have raised species-specific concerns in various comment letters; again, this goes to keeping the policy more general and leaving detailed recommendations for specific comment opportunities.

After the meeting, staff will clean up the policy document and memo, and will send around links with a deadline for final feedback from the PDT to share with the Committee on October 26.

*Northern Edge White Paper*

Materials for this discussion included the draft white paper, a new report from Scott Gallagher on the Before-After-Control-Impact RSA study, and corrected companion slide deck, and an older RSA report (Harris et al 2014). Overall, the PDT wanted some more time with Dr. Gallagher's report since it had just been shared the previous workday (9/17), so staff will poll for a follow-up call. Prior to that call, staff will summarize the results of the two RSA projects, SASI/Fishing Effects models, recent gear effects literature, and older gear effects literature specific to the northern edge (Collie, Valentine, Asch, and other), and attempt to synthesize findings across these studies. Staff will also overlay the locations of sites/field work to see where the Gallagher, Harris, and Collie sites are in relation to each other. While some of the conclusions appear to vary on the surface, results of the various studies may or may not actually be in conflict – different time periods, different study sites, different methods, etc., amidst an ecosystem that varies year to year – these studies represent snapshots of times/areas.

Overall, the PDT agreed that filtering the results for the white paper is important – there is no need to provide too much detail at this stage. The key question for now is, do the results of any studies cause us to rethink the findings of the Fishing Effects model, in terms of the impacts of fishing on habitat, and how those habitats might be managed. Ms. Bachman noted that we can cull content out of the white paper and save it for later or put it in an appendix. In terms of implications of the results for fishes, the PDT should consider and describe use at multiple life stages, times of day, times of year, etc. For example, fish moving between habitat types at night, and feeding, vs. sheltering from visual predators during the daytime. The concept of habitat management as “conserving the ecological stage” (a phrasing used during the PDT's discussion) may be useful for framing discussion with Committee.

Specific to Dr. Gallagher's work it will be important to state what methods/results are from the May 2018 RSA program final report vs. what is from the September 2021 report; additional image and statistical analyses were done between the two reports and the recent results should be the PDT's focus (although some of the field methods and other elements are likely best explained in the final report). One specific area to follow up on in Dr. Gallagher's work is how the contour lines for gravel, epifauna, etc. were drawn. Ms. Bachman will check with Dr. Gallagher if the methods aren't clear in any of the reports. A related question for all studies is where the samples were taken vs. where habitat characteristics were interpolated. Study sites/stations will be mapped if possible.

No other business was discussed, and the meeting adjourned approximately at 2:30 pm.

***Follow up items – staff will:***

- Clean up and share wind policy and memo with a deadline for final PDT input
- Poll for a longer northern edge conference call (we should also discuss fishing effort information during this call, which we neglected to do on 9/20)
  - Summarize and synthesize gear effects work prior to call
  - Continue to work on other sections of white paper, prioritizing the gear effects section