



New England Fishery Management Council

50 WATER STREET | NEWBURYPORT, MASSACHUSETTS 01950 | PHONE 978 465 0492

Daniel Salerno, *Acting Chair* | Cate O'Keefe, PhD, *Executive Director*

MEETING SUMMARY

Habitat Plan Development Team

Webinar

August 25, 2025

1:00-3:00 p.m.

The Habitat Plan Development Team (PDT) met via webinar at 1:00 p.m. on August 25, 2025 to discuss Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) designations (maps and text descriptions) including: (1) continued discussion on which mapping approach (i.e., based on 75% vs 95% quantiles) should be recommended to the Habitat Committee and Council; (2) reviewing life stage recommendations for proxies to use in lieu of egg and larval maps; (3) an update on approaches to map inshore / estuarine EFH areas and to determine environmental thresholds for EFH text descriptions; (4) reviewing elements of the framework document (structure, fishing effects analyses, impacts of alternatives, areas for future work, and ancillary information); and (5) non-EFH updates to be shared at the joint Habitat Committee and Advisory Panel meeting on September 11. There were no additions or changes to the agenda.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Michelle Bachman (PDT Chair), Jennifer Couture, and Julian Garrison (NEFMC); Sharon Benjamin and Chris Boelke (NMFS/GARFO); David Packer (NMFS/NEFSC); Dr. Peter Auster (University of Connecticut/Sea Research Foundation); Jessica Coakley and Tori Kentner (MAFMC); Dr. Chris Haak (Monmouth University); Julia Livermore (Rhode Island DEM, DMF); Anne Simpson (Maine DMR); Dr. Fiona Hogan (RODA); Melissa Smith (Committee Chair). In addition, about 8 other people attended.

KEY OUTCOMES

- The PDT discussed tradeoffs between using the 75% vs 95% quantile as the basis for the modeled component of the EFH designations but ultimately supported the use of the 75% quantile to provide more focused (less broad) EFH.
- The PDT finalized life stage recommendations to use as proxies for the egg and larval EFH maps.
 - Herring – For eggs, use fall adult maps; for larvae, verify use of spring juvenile maps with herring PDT members.
 - Cod and monkfish – For eggs and larvae, use the union of juvenile and adult distributions because these species have relatively long pelagic larval duration and so larvae are subject to drift. Additionally, modeled months do not fully cover the spawning seasons for these species.
 - Skates – Use adult (barndoor, clearnose, little, smooth, winter) or combined juvenile/adult (rosette, thorny) maps because spawning may occur throughout the year and egg cases are deposited on the seabed by adult female skates.
- The PDT received updates on the approaches for designating inshore EFH and for describing depth, temperature and salinity ranges in the text descriptions. The PDT encouraged staff to be clear in describing these methods in the framework document.
- The PDT received a review of the structure and content of the EFH Framework; Council staff will continue to circulate drafts for PDT review via correspondence.

- Council staff shared several non-EFH updates that will be mentioned at the upcoming joint Habitat Committee and Advisory Panel meeting on September 11, 2025.

AGENDA ITEM #1: 75% VS 95% QUANTILE-BASED EFH DESIGNATION

Council staff reviewed the timeline and workflow for the 2025 EFH Framework and shared a brief update on final outreach requests for input from species PDT and AP members. One PDT member recommended direct phone calls to select monkfish advisors and/or PDT members, since it is usually easier to connect that way. Council staff then led a discussion on which quantile (75% vs 95%) the PDT should recommend to the Habitat Committee and Council as the basis for the updated EFH designations; this proposed switch to the 75% quantile was informed by recent conversations among New England, Mid-Atlantic, and North Pacific Council staff and GARFO staff, as well as similar discussions at the recent Mid-Atlantic's EFH Fishery Management Action Team (FMAT) meeting on August 6, 2025. PDT members agreed with the advantages of using the 75% quantiles, particularly since they lead to more focused (less broad) EFH designations. One PDT member expressed concerns about how well the 75% quantile accounts for shifting species distributions, particularly at their leading and trailing edges. Council staff responded that the 20-year trends maps can help address these concerns and will be available as ancillary information. Staff also sought feedback from the PDT on adopting the North Pacific Council's terminology for referring to the various quantiles (25%, EFH hotspots; 50%, core EFH; 75%, principal FH; and 95%, general distribution area). The PDT generally appreciated the ongoing discussions and desire for coordination among Councils and encouraged staff to be clear about which quantile serves as the basis for EFH and in the language used to describe EFH to avoid confusion.

Public Comments:

- There were no public comments on this agenda item

Follow-Ups:

- **Garrison, Bachman** – receive/incorporate final feedback from species PDTs and APs and reach out again directly via phone calls to individuals for monkfish feedback

AGENDA ITEM #2: EGG AND LARVAL EFH MAP PROXIES

Council staff reviewed the life stage recommendations (i.e., juvenile, adult, or combined maps) to use as proxies for egg and larval EFH maps. Staff noted that, while the egg and larval designations in Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2 were based on data from ichthyoplankton data (EcoMon, MARMAP), recently fewer species are individually evaluated, staged, and assessed for eggs and larvae in the plankton data. As such, during the recent EFH Review, the PDT had decided to use proxies based on juvenile and/or adult maps. Council staff sought feedback on appropriate proxies for several species-life stage combinations, including larval herring, larval cod, and larval monkfish, given that the temporal domain of the survey data used in modeling (March-May, September-November) do not fully cover known spawning seasons and life history. The PDT recommended generally using the union of juvenile and adult maps as proxies when species have long pelagic larval duration and are subject to drift. The PDT felt this was reasonable for larval cod and monkfish, but for larval herring, Council staff will continue to consult with herring PDT members. For the seven skate species, egg maps will use the combined juvenile/adult maps for rosette and thorny skates and adult maps for the other species as proxies. PDT members clarified with GARFO staff how egg and larval EFH is used during EFH consultations (particularly for water entrainment and pipelines). The PDT encouraged staff to highlight egg and larval data sources as a research need and to consider the implications of egg and larval designations on EFH consultations.

Public Comments:

- There were no public comments on this agenda item

Follow-Ups:

- **Garrison, Cournane** – relay recommendations from herring PDT members on which life stage and/or seasonal subset to use as a proxy for herring larvae

AGENDA ITEM #3: INSHORE MAPPING UPDATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL RANGES

Ms. Kentner provided an update on the development of inshore / estuarine mapping methods, which use survey, climatology, and bathymetry data to refine inshore EFH designations. PDT members generally appreciated the new approaches and clarified data input and processing methods. The PDT discussed whether the inshore methods needed to match the quantiles used in the model-based component of the EFH designations (i.e., using 75% quantile) and how to handle spatial overlaps between Dr. Haak's model outputs and Ms. Kentner's non-modeled approaches (particularly for coastal, nearshore areas). The PDT also noted how there is fine-scale variability (spatially and temporally) in temperature and salinity and sampling limitations in estuaries that could warrant a more cautious, inclusive approach to designating inshore EFH. Council staff also provided an update on methods to use survey data to describe depth, temperature, and salinity ranges in the EFH text descriptions, noting that some of the approaches are conceptually similar to Ms. Kentner's envelopes methods. GARFO fully supports the refining of EFH maps and text descriptions based on improved data and modelling. If there is uncertainty in the data for inshore and estuarine areas, the council should consider being more inclusive in maps and text descriptions as the vast majority of EFH consultations occur in those areas. The PDT also emphasized the need for clear methods descriptions in the framework document.

Public Comments:

- There were no public comments on this agenda item

Follow-Ups:

- **EFH team (Bachman, Coakley, Garrison, Haak, Kentner)** – follow-up conversation on the estuary zones, species envelopes, environmental thresholds, and text descriptions and how their roles relative to the EFH designation maps

AGENDA ITEM #4: EFH FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT STRUCTURE AND ELEMENTS

Council staff gave a brief presentation on the structure and content of the EFH Framework document, including the range of alternatives, planned fishing effects analyses, impacts of EFH alternatives, areas for future work, and a recap of the ancillary information package. Staff noted that the range of alternatives will consist of a No Action alternative and a single action alternative to adopt all revised EFH designations. PDT members were supportive of this simplified structure and the comprehensiveness of the impacts section. Council staff also noted that this action will not ask the Council to develop new measures to minimize adverse effects. The PDT encouraged staff to be clear about whether areas for future work will be applied to the upcoming 2026 and 2027 EFH frameworks or considered for future EFH Reviews.

Public Comments:

- There were no public comments on this agenda item

Follow-Ups:

- **Bachman** – complete and circulate proposed Fishing Effects analyses for review

- **Bachman, Garrison** – continue drafting and cleaning up the Framework document, incorporating feedback from Habitat PDT and other groups (i.e., on species-specific text descriptions)
- **Bachman, Garrison, Benjamin** – draft and review impacts of EFH alternatives (NEPA analyses)

AGENDA ITEM #5: OTHER BUSINESS (NON-EFH UPDATES FOR THE SEPTEMBER 11 HABITAT COMMITTEE AND ADVISORY PANEL MEETING)

Council staff shared several non-EFH updates that will be mentioned at the joint Habitat Committee and Advisory Panel meeting on September 11: (1) The regional office is beginning the evaluation process for sunset provisions for dedicated areas for habitat research; at the three-year mark, the Council will need to re-evaluate whether to continue with those areas; (2) Ocean planning updates (these were discussed at the previous Habitat PDT meeting); and (3) a demonstration of the New England Sensitive Habitat Viewer Story Map, developed by the NOAA GARFO Habitat and Ecosystem Services Division (HESD).

Public Comments:

- There were no public comments on this agenda item

Follow-Ups:

- None

The meeting adjourned at approximately 3:00 p.m.