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New England Fishery Management Council

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MEETING SUMMARY

Small-Mesh Multispecies (Whiting) Advisory Panel and Plan Development Team

Warwick, RI and via Webinar

April 1, 2026

The Small-Mesh Multispecies (Whiting) Advisory Panel (AP) and Plan Development Team (PDT) met jointly on April 1, 2026, in Warwick, RI and via webinar at 10:00 am to consider:

- Fishery performance and issues;
- Preliminary analyses of the small-mesh multispecies fishery in preparation for the management action;
- Status and potential application of the Council's new risk policy to set specifications;
- Small-mesh fishery management issues to be identified by the advisors;
- Possible management measures and alternatives to consider for 2026 and future management actions; and other business.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Katie Almeida (AP Chair), Bonnie Brady, Dan Farnham Jr., Tom Testaverde Jr. (Whiting AP); Shannah Jaburek, Nicole Lengyel Costa, Robyn Linner, Ashleigh McCord, Danielle Palmer, Kris Winiarski (Whiting PDT and supporting analysts); Jackie Odell (Whiting Committee Chair); Andrew Applegate (PDT Chair), Emily Bodell, Mark Grant, Jonathon Peros, Naresh Pradhan (Council Staff). In addition, about 7 other people attended.

KEY OUTCOMES:

- The PDT and Advisors reviewed the small-mesh multispecies priorities for 2026, and received presentations on related topics including the Council's revised risk policy and anticipated data updates for red and silver hake.
- The PDT and Advisors reviewed and discussed several draft analyses and provided feedback for continued work.
- Individual Advisors discussed potential measures for the 2026 and/or future management actions, including expanding the area and/or season for some exemption areas and changing possession limits. However, no motions or formal consensus statements were made.

AGENDA ITEM #1: NEFMC ADVISORY PANEL POLICIES

Council staff presented the NEFMC Advisory Panel policies for the 2026-2028 AP term. There were no questions on the presentation.

AGENDA ITEM #2: 2026 MANAGEMENT ACTIONS AND RISK POLICY

2026 Action Planning and Schedule; Overview of Risk Factor Scoring and Application to Setting Specifications

Council staff reviewed the 2026 Council priorities for small-mesh multispecies, including a 2026 management action that would include small-mesh specifications for up to 5 years and potentially additional management measures. Staff also provided an overview of the Council's new risk policy. The Council will receive an update on this work at the April Council meeting, with a final decision on the risk policy scheduled for the June meeting.

Questions and concerns were raised by the PDT concerning guidance and procedures for risk factor scoring. Council staff explained that the Risk Policy Working Group (RPWG) is developing quantitative scoring guidance, but noted that there may be different data availability by species/stock that contributes to PDT scoring. The Committee chair cautioned against chasing noise in the survey data in the risk policy, and felt that missing survey data should also be taken into account. Staff noted that noisy data may be addressed by considering the data longer time period or multiple data sources.

The group discussed the P* approach used in the small-mesh fishery. Staff clarified that a 40% P* value is a probabilistic measure of uncertainty, not a value that limits the ABC to 40% of the OFL. Staff explained that the Council chose P*=25% for silver hake, taking into account risk factors such as the stock's vulnerability, value to the fishery, the ramifications to the fishing industry if it became overfished, and the central role of silver hake in the ecosystem as both predator and prey. In contrast, the Council chose a less conservative value for red hake of P*=40% under these same type of considerations. This control rule was reviewed and approved by the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC).

GARFO staff stated that the P* values are specified in regulation and may require a framework to change, but the methods to calculate P* values are not¹. Council staff from the RPWG explained that the risk policy is an independent tool that will interact with various harvest control rules in different ways, which as a result may require action to modify the FMP through a framework adjustment.

Assessment Data Update Planning

Council staff provided a brief overview of the data updates anticipated for silver and red hake. The Committee Chair asked about the time period for the catch and survey data included in the data update, noting that fall 2025 survey may have been sparse for some areas or stocks. The PDT will have to consider how to address data gaps. Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC) staff stated that they have not been using the term "assessment data update" because the data update does not include a model run. MAFMC staff also noted that less information provided less frequently may lead to higher uncertainty in the near term. A PDT member was concerned about the uncertainty around data availability and what will be used to inform the risk factor weighting and scoring, and asked why the risk policy does not include references to the data updates.

AGENDA ITEM #4: FISHERY PERFORMANCE

Questions for Advisors

Council staff presented a list of questions about recent fishery performance for AP discussion, which had been sent to the advisors in advance. Advisors provided feedback in the meeting and were asked to follow up with Council staff by May 1 with additional comments if needed.

¹ The P* levels of the control rule are not codified, but are a part of the approved FMP, and therefore would require a Framework Adjustment to change. However, the calculations of the values of those P* levels is not prescribed.

What factors have influenced recent fishing activity and how?

Advisors highlighted the impacts of offshore wind development on fishing activity. One Advisor noted that their fleet was not impacted by offshore wind development yet, but anticipated some impacts as wind farms begin generating power. Others were concerned about the ability to access traditional fishing grounds as offshore wind development continues. In southern New England, whiting fishing usually occurs from May – July, and SNE fishermen anticipate that some whiting fishing areas in the Vineyard Wind lease area will become inaccessible for that summer fishery.

Advisors also identified markets as an important factor. One Advisor stated that a frozen whiting market has recently developed and is stabilizing prices, though another noted that the frozen market is largely in southern New England, and it is not economical to ship fish from northern ports. Whiting prices and the overall market are major driving factors for vessels deciding whether to fish for whiting or another species like squid or scup. When fish are imported from Canada, domestic whiting prices can drop to \$.30/lb, which is not economically feasible for most vessels and barely pays for shipping costs. The Long Island fishery contributes to a fresh market in New York.

In the southern New England/mid-Atlantic region, prices have been stable, but are expected to drop in the coming weeks as vessels switch from scup and fluke fishing to whiting fishing. Some vessels are fishing for small-mesh species now because the scup fishery has closed. Generally, whiting is a target species until squid fishing begins. Last year, there were more regular-sized whiting than larger whiting, and this year there are more whiting around overall. Finally, an advisor stated that bycatch of skates is an issue unless a rope trawl is used, but noted that rope trawls are less effective for catching whiting.

How might these factors change in the near future? How do you anticipate that the fishery will adjust to these changes? How is the industry adjusting to changes in fish distribution?

An advisor explained that the timing of the fishery was different this year due to the presence of colder water temperatures, noting that Ipswich Bay had fewer large fish. Small-Mesh Area 2 had many large whiting and fewer medium whiting, but the fishery only lasted a month. Another Advisor agreed that the timing has changed, with fish arriving and departing fishing grounds later, and suggested that changing the dates for the exemption area fisheries could provide more flexibility for fishermen to adapt to different conditions each year. One Advisor noted that there have not been changes in fish distribution, but there have been more whiting overall.

Have any recent regulatory changes in other fisheries affected your small-mesh multispecies fishing and how?

An advisor stated that higher possession limits (recently changed to 15,000 lb for vessels using less than 3-inch mesh trawls) resulted in more whiting landings, lowering the price. Using smaller mesh brings in smaller fish, which also reduces the price. Another advisor stated that an influx of fish from other small-mesh fisheries has impacted prices, noting that a more targeting of whiting by vessels using the smaller mesh appears to be occurring. They also stated that there is a quality difference between whiting landed on groundfish vessels versus squid vessels due to different on-deck handling, and lower quality product further drives down prices. Another advisor noted that the scup fishery closing 2 months early also affects the timing and duration of whiting fishing, which led vessels to switch to whiting. They also explained that vessels from Long Island generally box the fish at sea, creating a better product.

Are the current small-mesh regulations appropriate? How could they be improved and how would they affect the small-mesh multispecies fishery?

One advisor felt that the current regulations are appropriate, and noted that increasing possession limits could flood the market and lower whiting prices. They suggested possibly lowering possession limits for non-target fisheries (i.e., squid) and increasing the red hake possession limit in the north now that there are fewer participating vessels. Another advisor suggested an increase in possession limits for targeted

whiting trips, explaining that it is difficult to avoid catching larger amounts of red hake when fishing out east, though they are testing gear modifications to minimize red hake catch. It would be helpful to liberalize the red hake possession limit as they are marketable fish. They were also interested in some seasonal flexibility to address climate instability. An advisor noted that the red hake trigger could increase discards.

What other factors may affect the small-mesh multispecies fishery going forward?

The Advisors identified several factors that may impact the fishery, including aquaculture, other fishing pressure, offshore wind development, and climate change. An advisor mentioned a recent application through the Army Corps of Engineers for a mussel aquaculture farm proposed in historic fishing grounds in southern New England. There is an initiative through the current administration to support and expand aquaculture, and the advisor suggested staying aware of aquaculture development and any overlapping areas of concern. Another advisor stated that there could be an influx of effort to the small-mesh fishery from other fisheries that may be less profitable than in years past, with one advisor noting that the scup fishery closure could cause more whiting fishing this year. A few Advisors raised climate change as a concern, explaining that seasons may become more erratic. If fish are not present in the exemption areas, it will impact the fishery. An advisor flagged marine carbon dioxide removal efforts as potentially impactful to the fishery.

Are there any recreational fishing issues that should be considered?

The Advisors did not bring forward any recreational fishing issues.

Domestic whiting prices and imports

Council staff presented an analysis of domestic whiting prices and imports. There is a statistically significant inverse relationship between silver hake prices and total whiting supply, including imports. Prices are also correlated with other factors such as fuel prices and inflation. The sharp decline in US silver hake prices after 2022 was likely due to increasing whiting imports with stable domestic landings, broader fresh-fish market demand, and macroeconomic forces.

An advisor asked if the data could be broken out between southern and northern New England. Staff explained that the data used in this analysis is pooled for New England, but there is information on landings and prices by area in the recent fishery performance report, presented at the December 2025 Council meeting. Another advisor asked if prices were averaged across whiting size categories, noting that there are differences in terms of price, but most catch would be regular whiting. A good price for kings would range from \$1.50 to \$2, larges can range from \$1-2, and regulars could range widely from 25 cents to \$1.50 depending on a variety of factors. The analysis pooled all market categories, as imports are often not reported by size category.

Another advisor asked about the comparison of chicken prices in the analysis. Council staff noted that any protein could have been used for this purpose, which was to determine if only silver hake prices were changing or if there were similar trends in other proteins. The advisor was interested in the overall price per pound for whiting, which Council staff could provide, but they noted that a standardized index is more suitable for making comparisons. There was also some discussion about the impacts of imports on domestic whiting prices. Council staff explained that domestic production has not been able to keep up with demand, and imports typically get a lower price than domestic products. Another staff member relayed information from fish dealers in New York, who stated that import prices have remained the same, but demand has fundamentally changed, related to societal changes (i.e., purchasing fish from restaurants or home delivery instead of buying fresh fish from the market for home cooking). Higher landings of domestic whiting may not have as much impact on prices as import markets. Dealers reported that better marketing for local, fresh fish could increase domestic demand and support prices. An advisor noted that the groundfish industry has USDA contracts for some species, which may be beneficial for

whiting. The Committee Chair also mentioned recent legislation focused on strengthening US fisheries and expanding the USDA program for seafood.

Observed red hake catch versus catch limits

Council staff shared an analysis of red hake catch and discards, with a focus on before and after 2022 (when the reduced possession limit in the southern area was implemented) to determine how possession limits may be impacting discards. Since the possession limit was implemented, discards per trip have increased, particularly from July-October. The majority of observed small-mesh trips did not approach anywhere close to a 600 lb possession limit, though there were a few trips higher catch. While a different possession limit could contribute to lower discards, other factors appear to be influencing discards.

An Advisor was interested in reviewing the data used in the analysis, but Council staff explained that the trip-level data that was used is confidential and would need to be summarized at a higher level for release. Staff indicated that they could tabulate such information if the type of summary was defined. The Advisor was interested in the impact of reduced possession limits being implemented by the trigger, noting that if the trigger was larger, discards could be turned into landings, but given the results presented it is unlikely to show such a phenomenon on many trips. Seasonal catches can vary from a variety of factors besides the possession limit. A PDT member stated that the fishery has hit the southern red hake trigger for the past three years, but the in-season accountability measure (lowering the possession limit to 400 lb) has not been implemented by NMFS because the fishery was not projected to reach the TAL. They offered to review the history and see if/when the possession limit has been implemented in recent years (this information was last summarized in the 2022 SAFE Report). Council staff noted that potential management alternatives related to red hake could be discussed at the joint AP and Committee meeting in May. They also stated that red hake is being considered for designation as an ecosystem component species, which could affect how conservatively to manage the red hake stocks.

The preliminary conclusion from the analyses is that a different possession limit could reduce discards on a small fraction of trips, but most discards are occurring for other reasons (price, cost of handling product, etc) rather than possession limits and occur even when the catch is less than the applicable possession limit.

Commercial fishery risk factors

Council staff reviewed the commercial fishery factor from the risk policy in more detail for AP discussion. The Committee chair pointed out that red hake is not a constraining stock, but it is significant bycatch in other fisheries. It was noted that quotas for squid and scup affect the amount of whiting fishing effort, but not vice versa. An advisor stated that some vessels exclusively participate in the whiting fishery, while others opt in when it is economically more favorable than alternatives. When Canadian product floods the domestic whiting market, dealers tell US vessels not to land whiting.

A PDT member asked how primary and secondary ports would be identified and why this is the metric for fishing communities, noting that they thought of primary ports as a vessel's landing port, which may differ from the home port. A contractor supporting risk policy work explained that the RPWG is working on the definitions of primary and secondary ports in coordination with the Social Sciences Branch at NMFS, and stated that if the AP can identify the most important ports for whiting in general, it would be helpful. Council staff noted that whiting fishing port activity is available in recent environmental assessments and fishery performance reports, but questions remain around how to apply it as a risk factor component. The Committee chair suggested a focus on the number of total and active permits and information about the state of the fishery for the factor. They commented that the Council has no specific goals related to an appropriate number of ports or port activity. Council staff supporting the RPWG noted the RPWG will pivot to providing further guidance on community risk factors, looking at information such as trends in the number of dealers and vessels, landings, and revenues. A PDT member suggested

using caution when interpreting some of this information, offering the example that a decline in dealers may not mean an overall decline if there is consolidation of businesses.

AGENDA ITEM #6: EXEMPTION AREA DATA AND INFORMATION

The Committee chair shared some background on past discussions around modifications to the small-mesh exemption areas, and an overview of a 2016-2017 exempted fishing permit (EFP) research looking at bycatch in extended seasons for two exemption areas. In addition, Council staff presented a draft memorandum with background on the small-mesh exemption areas, information on letters of authorization (LOA), and bycatch allowances. Finally, staff reviewed an analysis of whiting and large-mesh groundfish catch ratios.

Letters of Authorization and finfish bycatch rules

An Advisor provided some context for fishing locations in the Cultivator Shoal and Raised Footrope Trawl areas, noting that effort is generally concentrated where fish congregate. There have been some issues with fixed gear in the Cultivator Shoal area, but not as much recently. There is also a good relationship between fleets off Cape Cod to avoid gear conflict, though there have been some gear issues near Provincetown. Advisors also noted that while they are familiar with the regulations, the LOAs serve as a reference document about applicable Exemption Area regulations, and are presented to the US Coast Guard if boarded. There were some mixed experiences with delays in receiving LOAs during the government shutdown in fall 2025 – one advisor stated that they typically apply for an LOA at the beginning of the season, and didn't have any delays. Others experienced varying delays in receiving their LOAs.

Council staff discussed whether there was a path forward/ necessity for standardizing the bycatch limits across exemption areas. There could be reasons to make bycatch allowances the same, but it is important to evaluate available data when considering making adjustments. The Committee Chair noted the 5% bycatch threshold, and wondered if it was still relevant if there are fluctuations year to year, offering the example of recent large haddock year classes. Staff relayed that there was some discussion at the Council regarding the large year classes in recent years. Staff also explained that while bycatch is limited to no more than 5% in the regulations, they also state that exemption areas should be periodically reviewed, which could include evaluating whether an exceedance was an isolated incident or is becoming a pattern. Trends in large-mesh multispecies bycatch in the whiting fishery were given in the December 2025 Fishery Performance Report. Changes to limits on retention of non-target catch could also be included in a more overarching management action to revise exemption areas area management. One advisor suggested allowing some landings of incidental lobster catch.

Whiting and large-mesh groundfish catch ratios

Council staff shared an analysis of small-mesh multispecies to large-mesh groundfish catch ratios on large-mesh trips. While these vessels are not fishing for small-mesh species and the large-mesh trawls do not select small fish such as small whiting, areas with higher than average catch of small-mesh species could be worth investigating for potential spatial/temporal expansions of small-mesh exemption areas. Most of the areas with higher catch ratios were in or around Cultivator Shoal, Small-Mesh Area 1, and near Stellwagen Bank. Meeting participants recommended focusing further analysis on expanding existing exemption areas and accounting for other updated management areas rather than potential new areas. Some areas may be problematic due to fixed gear and the potential for gear conflict. Council staff flagged the southern portion of Cultivator Shoal (the notch cut out by former Closed Area 1) as an area of interest, and noted expanding the western boundary of Small-Mesh Area II to the Western Gulf of Maine closed area boundary as possibilities to consider, possibly providing more opportunities for vessels to catch fish when they are available. The PDT and advisors recommended that the data should be explored further to identify suitable expansions of the Cultivator Shoals Area into what was Closed Area I and to the west of Small-Mesh Area II further to the west to abut the revised Western Gulf of Maine closed area.

AGENDA ITEM #7: DISCUSSION OF POTENTIAL MANAGEMENT ALTERNATIVES

There were no specific or strong recommendations for specific management alternatives other than examining the data further to identify a strawman alternative for expanding Small-Mesh Area II and the Cultivator Shoals Area. Advisors became familiar with the issues and PDT analysis to be prepared to discuss potential alternatives when they meet with the Committee on May 19th.

AGENDA ITEM #8: OTHER BUSINESS

With no other business, the meeting adjourned at 4:18 pm.