



## New England Fishery Management Council

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## DRAFT MEETING SUMMARY

### Habitat Joint Committee and Advisory Panel

Wakefield, MA and via webinar

September 11, 2025

9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.

The Habitat Committee (Committee) and Advisory Panel (AP) met jointly in Wakefield, MA and via webinar at 9:00 A.M. to (1) review the draft 2025 Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Framework and identify a preferred EFH designation alternative for Council consideration on September 24; (2) receive a demonstration of the New England Sensitive Habitat Viewer Story Map developed by the NOAA Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) Habitat and Ecosystem Services Division (HESD); (3) discuss the ongoing three-year review of the Stellwagen and Georges Bank Dedicated Habitat Research Areas; (4) Receive updates on ocean planning activities, the Offshore Wind Regional Fund Administrator Compensation Process, and a presentation on a proposed mussel farm in Rhode Island Sound; and (5) discuss EFH-related work that could be completed following completion of the 2025 framework. There were no changes or additions to the agenda.

**MEETING ATTENDANCE:** Habitat Committee: Melissa Smith (Chair), Geoff Smith (Vice-Chair), Peter Aarrestad, Christopher Boelke (Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office; GARFO), Michelle Duval (MAFMC); Eric Hansen, Scott Olszewski, and Peter Whelan; Habitat Advisory Panel (AP): Chris McGuire (Chair), Gib Brogan, Jeff Kaelin, Lane Johnston, Ron Smolowitz, and David Wallace; Other Council Members in attendance: Ted Platz; NEFMC staff: Michelle Bachman (Plan Development Team [PDT] Chair), Jennifer Couture, Alex Dunn, Julian Garrison; MAFMC staff: Jessica Coakley (EFH Fishery Management Action Team [FMAT] Chair) and Tori Kentner; GARFO staff: Christine Ford, Sabrina Pereira, Doug Potts, Kaitlyn Shaw; NOAA General Counsel: Mitch MacDonald, Scott Sakowski. External presenters: Sydney Gustafson (BrownGreer), Carolina Coccoli (Carbon Trust), Christopher Schillaci (Newport Mussels). In addition, 13 other people attended.

### KEY OUTCOMES

- The Committee and Advisory Panel recommended that the Council select Alternative 2 in the 2025 Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Designation Framework as preferred. This alternative would update EFH designations for Atlantic cod, Atlantic herring, monkfish, barndoor skate, clearnose skate, little skate, rosette skate, smooth skate, thorny skate, and winter skate.
- The Committee and Advisory Panel received various updates on topics related to habitat and ocean planning.
- The Committee and Advisory Panel learned about the upcoming Dedicated Habitat Research Area (DHRA) 3-Year review process. Once a report on research in the DHRAs has been provided by NOAA GARFO, staff will work with the Committee and Advisory Panel chairs to determine whether to hold a meeting to develop a recommendation to the Council about sunseting the

Stellwagen Bank and/or Georges Bank DHRA. Alternatively, the Council can take up this issue directly at a future meeting.

- The Committee and Advisory Panel concurred with staff recommendations for work that can be completed in 2026, including an action to updated EFH designations for small mesh species, groundfish species (in addition to Atlantic cod), and sea scallops.

#### ***AGENDA ITEM #1: 2025 ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT FRAMEWORK***

Council staff reviewed the draft 2025 EFH Designation Framework, including the process to update map and text components, solicit feedback from species Plan Development Teams (PDTs) and APs, designation alternatives, and impacts and fishing effects analyses. Committee and AP members appreciated the efforts that have gone into the modeling and designation approaches, which generally advance prior methods, use the best available data, and will facilitate future designation updates.

Committee and AP members discussed data inputs and the designation approaches, raising concerns about documenting environmental shifts, providing adequate representation for seasons with limited survey data (i.e., summer and winter), data sources and the time series of data used, language used to describe model quantiles and fishing impacts, and clarity in how the EFH designation maps are presented. The group suggested examining the data and model outputs at finer temporal scales (e.g., five-year bins, summer and winter seasons) and presenting the EFH maps more clearly with worked examples that compare the proposed designations to the model quantiles and current designations. Council staff noted the importance of consistent language between NEFMC and MAFMC in describing EFH, since the two Councils share a regional office for EFH consultations. GARFO staff emphasized the role of EFH designations in triggering consultations for action agencies; in these consultations, more detailed information and conversations on the more granular aspects of habitat use can be pulled in. GARFO staff also noted the value of updating the EFH designations and refining the process for communications. Committee and AP members also discussed how the EFH designations and ancillary products can be applied to future management decisions or other non-Council contexts.

#### ***Public Comments:***

- **Peter Hughes (Atlantic Capes Fisheries)** expressed interest in seeing shifts over time for individual species, especially comparing trends over the entire timeseries (2000-2019) to more recent trends. Council staff noted that 20-year trends plots for each species will be included in the framework appendix as ancillary information and that individual years can be viewed as maps in the Northeast Regional Habitat Assessment (NRHA) Data Explorer.
- **Kelly Whitmore (Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries)** suggested including the ASMFC summer shrimp survey in the datasets underlying the EFH designations to help address seasonal gaps in survey data (i.e., summer, winter). Council staff noted that the NRHA Data Explorer contains these and other summer / winter data, but they have not been integrated into the models supporting this framework. It may be possible to include them in future versions of the species distribution models. In addition, data such as longline data can be potentially included in a modeling framework based on presence / absence, rather than abundance.

#### **1. ADVISORY PANEL MOTION: Kaelin /Wallace**

That the Habitat Advisory Panel recommends to the Council Alternative 2 Updated EFH designations as the preferred alternative.

*Rationale:* None provided.

#### **Discussion on the Motion:**

- AP members discussed the differences in the designation approaches and underlying data between the two alternatives. Specifically, the No Action alternative relies on inshore and

offshore survey data through ~2005 and is based on ten-minute squares, whereas Alternative 2: Updated EFH designations relies on data from 2000-2019 and combines modeled and non-modeled approaches. AP members echoed the earlier suggestions to develop a worked example that compares the old and new designation maps and to examine the data in smaller (e.g., five-year) time blocks. These suggestions would help clarify differences in the alternatives and identify trends at finer temporal scales.

- AP members also encouraged staff to examine commercial fisheries catch to help ground-truth EFH designations, which are mainly based on fishery independent data.
- One AP member suggested incorporating three-dimensional oceanographic data to better account for changes in water temperature.

**Public Comment:**

- There were no public comments on the motion.

**MOTION #1 CARRIED BY UNANIMOUS CONSENT**

**2. COMMITTEE MOTION: G Smith / Hansen**

That the Habitat Committee recommends to the Council Alternative 2 Updated EFH designations as the preferred alternative.

*Rationale:* The updated modeling approach is an advance on the methods used for previous designations and uses best available, up-to-date data. The Committee recognizes that there have been changes in the environment since the previous updates and that this is our best opportunity to address those changes in the EFH designations.

**Discussion on the Motion:**

- There was no further discussion on the motion.

**Public Comment:**

- There were no public comments on the motion.

**MOTION #2 CARRIED BY UNANIMOUS CONSENT**

***AGENDA ITEM #2: SENSITIVE HABITAT VIEWER DEMONSTRATION***

Ms. Kaitlyn Shaw and Ms. Sabrina Pereira (GARFO HESD) gave a presentation on the Sensitive Inshore Essential Fish Habitat of New England story map, which was designed as a companion to NOAA's EFH Mapper and intended to help streamline the EFH consultations process. The story map includes a Sensitive Habitat Viewer, which allows developers and action agencies to explore potential sensitive habitats in a potential project area and determine recommended surveys and habitat delineations to include in EFH assessments provided to NOAA. The Story Map also includes maps and descriptions of Sensitive Habitat types as well as additional State-specific Resources. Ms. Shaw and Ms. Pereira walked through several examples in the Sensitive Habitat Viewer and noted several next steps, including replicating the tool for Mid-Atlantic resources and sharing the tool on the NOAA website.

Committee and AP members appreciated the fine-scale visualizations and information in the story map, and Council staff suggested posting the link on the Council's webpage to amplify the reach of the tool.

*Public Comment:*

- There were no public comments on this agenda item.

### ***AGENDA ITEM #3: 3-YEAR DEDICATED HABITAT RESEARCH AREA REVIEW***

Council staff gave a brief presentation on the ongoing 3-year Dedicated Habitat Research Area (DHRA) Review for the Stellwagen Bank and Georges Bank DHRAs, designated originally via Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2 (2018). Staff described the background of these DHRAs and need for review, noting that the Council had previously recommended retaining them in 2022 and that other habitat research areas that do not have associated sunset provisions can be discussed during the review as well. Staff then gave an overview of the DHRA Review process for Fall 2025 (anticipating that the Council will make its recommendations to GARFO at the December 2025 or January 2026 meeting) and sought feedback on how the Committee and AP would like to review and discuss these DHRAs. GARFO will publish a Federal Register notice to solicit information on research occurring in the two DHRAs. Following the notice period, GARFO will summarize public comments and other available information on research in the DHRAs in a report to the Council. GARFO staff clarified that the notice has been submitted but not yet published, so there is not much more information that can be provided at the Council's September meeting.

Given this, Committee and AP members opted to hold off on discussing the DHRAs until more information was available. Staff will work with the Committee and AP chairs to determine if the information obtained through the public comment period warrants a meeting of the Committee and AP to develop a recommendation to the Council about retaining or sunsetting the DHRAs. If the information in the report is limited, such that a Committee / AP meeting is not deemed to be worthwhile, the Council could consider the report directly and provide a recommendation to the Regional Administrator.

#### ***Public Comments:***

- There were no public comments on this agenda item.

### ***AGENDA ITEM #4: OCEAN PLANNING UPDATES***

#### ***Council Staff Updates***

Council staff provided an update on recent ocean planning activities, including updates from the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management on wind energy areas and project permits, other offshore wind updates (i.e., on specific projects), and other miscellaneous updates (e.g., the New England Shelf Hydrogeology project, the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute's [WHOI] Locking Ocean Carbon in the Northeast Shelf and Slope [LOC-NESS] project, Maine Research Array Wind Energy Area Surveys).

One Committee member emphasized the need for clear guidelines on data transparency in offshore wind projects, given that developers may consider their scientific data to be proprietary. They also expressed concerns about offshore mining and encouraged staff to stay apprised of these activities. Council staff echoed these concerns and noted that in New England, it seems likely that these activities would mainly consist of sand mining.

#### ***Offshore Wind Regional Fund Administrator Updates***

Ms. Sydney Gustafson (BrownGreer) and Ms. Caroline Coccoli (Carbon Trust) gave a presentation on the Regional Fund Administrator (RFA), which is a third-party entity designed to engage stakeholders and develop a process for compensating losses incurred by the fishing community due to offshore wind. Ms. Gustafson and Ms. Coccoli provided an overview of the program, including its guiding principles, structure, and engagement efforts.

Committee and AP members clarified with the presenters that the RFA focuses on direct compensation for losses due to the inability to fish within project areas, noting that there are other impacts beyond the project area (e.g., shoreside processing, impacts to fishing outside the development area, etc.).

### Newport Mussels Project Overview

Mr. Christopher Schillaci (Newport Mussels) gave a presentation on a proposed commercial-scale mussel farm in Rhode Island Sound. Mr. Schillaci described the siting and design considerations and engagement with the NOAA National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science (NCCOS) and the U.S. Coast Guard.

GARFO staff appreciated the early coordination on this project and encouraged Mr. Schillaci to continue to engage with other federal agencies. Committee members expressed some concerns about the project area's footprint, noting potential conflicts with vessel navigation and protected species (especially North Atlantic Right Whales). The gear is suspended below the surface such that smaller vessels should be able to pass over it while vessels with deeper drafts would need to go around the site. Moorings will be marked with Private Aids to Navigation, the project would be charted, and a Notice to Mariners will be broadcast. Mr. Schillaci indicated some flexibility to revise the project design, for example to include a transit lane between the two 1,175-acre sub-areas. A formal public comment opportunity is anticipated this coming fall or winter.

### Public Comments:

- There were no public comments on this agenda item.

### **AGENDA ITEM #5: WORK PLANNING**

Council staff led a discussion on work planning for 2026, including a review of the 2025 Council Priorities and Activities, and noted the need to be mindful of resource availability and staff capacity at the Council, NEFSC, and other collaborators. For 2026, these activities include the following:

- Continue to revise EFH designations (for all remaining NEFMC-managed species except Atlantic salmon and deep-sea red crab, which are data-poor and will be deferred to 2027);
- Continue to advance Fishing Effects Model analyses;
- Integrate habitat information into Council initiatives;
- Communication, information sharing of habitat products;
- Collaborate with habitat, ocean planning partners on science and management issues; and
- Maintain expertise on habitat and ocean planning science and research

Council staff noted that these are not formal work priorities and that the Council will have an initial discussion about 2026 work priorities at its September meeting but will finalize them at the December meeting.

One Committee member asked whether there are any issues of major concern in the draft workplan. Council staff responded that it would be ideal to front-load the EFH modeling effort for the remaining species while Dr. Haak is still contracted with the Council. That said, there is flexibility to scale these activities according to available resources. For example, EFH designation updates for some species could be deferred to 2027, especially considering other Council priorities or possible Council involvement in potential Secretarial actions. Staff can provide updates at future meetings about resource constraints.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 3:15 p.m.