



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEETING SUMMARY

Habitat Advisory Panel

Webinar

May 29, 2026

9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

The Habitat Advisory Panel (AP) met jointly via webinar at 9:00 a.m. to (1) Welcome new members to the Habitat AP and review AP policies and procedures; (2) Discuss the status of the Georges Bank and Stellwagen Dedicated Habitat Research Areas (DHRAs) and recommend retention or sunseting of one or both areas; (3) Discuss the planned scope, structure, and information sources of the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (GSC HMA) Surfclam Exemption Program Evaluation and provide feedback on the approach; (4) Receive an overview of the Essential Fish Habitat designation approach, review draft designations for a number of species to be included in the 2026 EFH Designation Framework, and provide feedback on draft EFH maps, text descriptions, and/or additional information sources; and (5) other business, as necessary. There were no changes or additions to the agenda.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Christopher McGuire (Chair), Todd Bragdon, Gib Brogan, James Buchok, Thomas Dignes, Lane Johnston, Drew Minkiewicz, Alice Stratton, and David Wallace; Melissa Smith (Habitat Committee Chair); Michelle Bachman (Plan Development Team [PDT] Chair) and Julian Garrison (NEFMC staff); Douglas Christel, Gabriella Feil, Christine Ford, Thomas Heimann, Douglas Potts, and Sue Tuxbury (NMFS GARFO staff). In addition, about 19 other people attended.

KEY OUTCOMES

- The Advisory Panel and Committee Chairs welcomed new members to the Habitat AP, and Council staff provided information on the Advisory Panel Policies and Procedures.
- The AP reviewed past, ongoing, and future research activities in the Georges Bank and Stellwagen Dedicated Habitat Research Areas (DHRAs), which are both up for review per the three-year sunset provision established in Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2. The AP discussed whether to retain or sunset one or both DHRAs which resulted in the following motions:
 - The AP recommended that the Habitat Committee and Council request the administrative removal of the Dedicated Habitat Research Area designation on Georges Bank.
 - The AP requested that the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office and the Habitat Plan Development Team complete the dependence analysis required by the OHA2 review framework for the Stellwagen Dedicated Habitat Research Area and evaluate the effects of the DHRA on the ability to obtain research permits before the Council makes any retention of sunset recommendation to the Regional Administrator.
- The AP received a presentation on the planned scope and information to be reviewed in the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area surfclam exemption program evaluation. The AP passed a motion to recommended that the Habitat Committee direct the Habitat PDT to expand the scope of the surfclam exemption program evaluation.

- The AP received updates on the 2026 EFH Designation Framework, including an overview of the workflow, designation methods, feedback and engagement process, and timeline. Given time constraints, the AP reviewed examples of updated draft EFH designations (maps and text) for three species and provided input on the feedback process.
- The AP expressed interest in receiving ocean planning updates and suggested organizing habitat research share days in the future, similar to those in the scallop Research Set Aside Program, once research findings on offshore wind projects are available.

AGENDA ITEM #1: HABITAT ADVISORY PANEL INTRODUCTIONS, POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES

The AP and Committee Chairs welcomed new members to the Habitat AP and reviewed the agenda. The AP members introduced themselves. Staff gave a presentation on the Advisory Panel Policies and Procedures, including descriptions of the role, membership, organization, and time commitment (number of meetings anticipated each year). Staff also reviewed how AP members are appointed and reimbursed for meeting travel and meal expenses as well as expectations for meetings. The AP Chair noted that the Habitat AP is one of the few APs with such broad representation across areas of expertise, interests, and fisheries, and Council staff encouraged AP members to share their knowledge and experience.

Public Comment

- There were no public comments on this agenda item.

AGENDA ITEM #2: DEDICATED HABITAT RESEARCH AREA REVIEW

Council staff reviewed the status of the Georges Bank and Stellwagen Dedicated Habitat Research Areas (DHRAs) and led an AP discussion on the retention or sunseting of one or both DHRAs. Staff provided information on the DHRAs, including their purpose, initial creation and subsequent three-year review cycles, criteria for their retention (documented active and ongoing research and/or pending or approved research focused on DHRA topics) and recent and future research activities in the DHRAs. Staff noted that while some fishing restrictions are due to the DHRA designations, there are also restrictions associated with overlapping management areas; therefore, removing the DHRA designation does not automatically open the areas to all types of fishing. Staff also noted that, besides the ongoing, long-term spring and fall bottom trawl surveys and Ecosystem Monitoring (EcoMon) surveys from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC), there is no current or planned research focused on DHRA-specific questions in the Georges Bank DHRA.

In contrast, in the Stellwagen DHRA, recent research has included optical, acoustic, and environmental DNA surveys in addition to the NEFSC surveys, and Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary (SBNMS) is planning several habitat, biodiversity, oceanographic, and economic analyses that rely on comparisons within and outside the DHRA. Council staff then reviewed the recommendations from the recent Habitat PDT meeting on April 30, 2026. The Habitat PDT recommended retaining the Stellwagen DHRA as it meets the criteria for retention. The Habitat PDT recommended retaining the Georges Bank DHRA pending further discussion of tradeoffs between having a relatively undisturbed area in which to conduct dedicated research vs. lost fishing opportunities. Council staff then described next steps for the two DHRAs following the AP's discussion and recommendations, including Habitat Committee and Council discussions and recommendations at their June 12 and June 24 meetings, respectively.

The AP discussed whether to retain or sunset one or both Georges Bank and Stellwagen DHRAs. The AP Chair clarified whether there were any particular species or habitats of interest when these DHRAs were first designated in Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2 (OHA2). Council staff responded that OHA2 encompassed many different types of habitat management designations (e.g., Essential Fish Habitat, Habitat Management Areas, groundfish closure areas, DHRAs, etc.), many of which were informed by modeling efforts on regional-scale spatiotemporal impacts of bottom-tending gears on benthic habitat. At the time, modeling uncertainty prompted the Council to designate areas dedicated to habitat research questions; Stellwagen DHRA was chosen because it encompassed a range of habitat types, and the

Georges Bank DHRA was chosen because it had been a long-standing groundfish closure area (Closure Area 1) with scallop harvest in and around the area.

One AP member emphasized that these points provided important context and asked whether sunseting one or both DHRAs would trigger the need for habitat conservation actions elsewhere to offset adverse effects of opening these areas to fishing gears. Staff responded that this question has been discussed by the PDT previously and that sunseting would not require mitigation because, when they were first created, the DHRAs were framed as potentially temporary areas focused on the research and conceptual value of areas off-limits to fishing. Positive impacts of the DHRA designations would stem from an improved understanding of the relationship between fish habitats and fish survival, growth, and reproduction (OHA2 FEIS Volume 4, Section 3.4, [link](#)). The Council relies on other more durable, indefinite habitat management areas to meet Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) requirements to minimize adverse effects of fishing.

Another AP member asked whether the sunset provision would continue to be triggered every three years. Staff responded that if a DHRA is retained, the need to continue it would continue to be reviewed every three years (unless the Council were to recommend changes to the sunset regulations through a management action). If a DHRA is removed, then there would be no ongoing obligation to review research occurring in that location going forward.

One AP member asked whether there have been any periodic habitat assessments since the Stellwagen and Georges Bank DHRAs were put into place. Staff clarified that there is an optical survey that has examined seafloor habitat conditions, species distributions, and patterns of natural disturbance in the Stellwagen DHRA. In the Georges Bank DHRA, the recent research activities have included the NEFSC bottom trawl and EcoMon surveys. The group discussed that there is also a drop-camera survey by the School for Marine Science and Technology (SMAST; University of Massachusetts Dartmouth) in the DHRA, but staff are not aware of any longitudinal habitat studies based on those drop-camera data. The AP Chair suggested reaching out to SMAST drop-camera or the NEFSC Habitat Mapping Camera (HabCam) efforts; one AP member noted that there are SMAST stations in the Georges Bank DHRA and that there have been Northern Gulf of Maine (NGOM) optical surveys in the area as well, albeit focused on scallops and not habitat.

Public Comment

- There were no public comments on the pre-motion discussion of the DHRAs.

1. AP MOTION: MINKIEWICZ / BRAGDON

That the Habitat Advisory Panel recommends that the Habitat Committee and Council request administrative removal of the Dedicated Habitat Research Area designation on Georges Bank.

Rationale: When the Council took final action on Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2 (OHA2), there were sunset provisions put in place with specific criteria for the retention of the DHRAs. The Georges Bank DHRA does not meet those two criteria and therefore should be allowed to sunset. Additionally, the 2022 review of the DHRA found that these criteria were not met, but the Council at the time opted to retain the designation. Given that there is still no active, ongoing research, retaining the DHRA again would be breaking the social contract between the Council and stakeholder community and damage the integrity of the sunset mechanism the Council adopted in OHA2. Finally, recent scallop resource surveys in the DHRA found virtually zero biomass and no recent recruitment, so the closure is not protecting a productive resource.

Discussion on the Motion:

- The AP Chair asked Council staff to elaborate further on the rationale behind the PDT's recommendation to retain the Georges Bank DHRA. In staff's view, the PDT's intent was to

highlight the longstanding nature of the closed area and that changing the regulatory regime would be a marked shift from how the area has been managed. As such, the PDT was asking the Habitat AP, Committee, and Council to be thoughtful about the criteria as well as weigh the value of potential research and lost fishing opportunities in the area. However, the PDT also acknowledged that the 2026 review marks two consecutive review cycles in which there has been no active, ongoing research focused on DHRA topics.

- AP members generally agreed with the rationale that the Georges Bank DHRA does not meet the criteria for retention. One AP member noted there could be operational and transiting issues for fishermen due to the DHRA. Council staff agreed that these issues could be worth discussing further, noting that fishing vessels can transit through the area but must leave gear stowed and unavailable for immediate use while doing so.
- One AP member recognized the value and expertise of the PDT on these technical issues and echoed the PDT recommendation to examine tradeoffs, particularly where the DHRA may have research value (e.g., as a sentinel site) even if there is no ongoing research.
- The maker of the motion also suggested that during the development of OHA2, the Georges Bank DHRA was neither a vulnerable nor high value area according to the analyses at the time (including the Swept Area Seabed Impact [SASI] model)¹; part of the rationale for its designation in OHA2 was the sunset provision and three-year review cycle, which further underscores the need for the Council to hold to that provision.

Public Comment:

- **Ron Smolowitz (Coonamesett Farm Foundation; CFF)** supported the motion to recommend removing the DHRA, echoing the AP discussion on the low fishing productivity of the area (particularly for scallops and groundfish). Mr. Smolowitz noted CFF-conducted research in 2015 that involved moving scallops into the area and tracking their dispersal with cameras. The research found that the high energy environment dispersed the scallops away from the area. Mr. Smolowitz questioned whether Georges Bank DHRA was more a token habitat research designation at this point, given the low productivity and lack of ongoing research.
- **Sefatia Romeo Theken (Deputy Commissioner, MA Department of Fish and Game)** suggested that the motion be made via roll-call vote or that Council staff verbalize the results of the show-of-hands, given that some members of the public may be listening via phone and thus unable to see raised hands on the webinar.

MOTION #1 CARRIED ON A SHOW OF HANDS (5/3/0)

2. AP MOTION: MINKIEWICZ / BROGAN

That the Habitat Advisory Panel requests that GARFO and the Habitat PDT complete the dependence analysis required by the OHA2 review framework for the Stellwagen Dedicated Habitat Research Area and evaluate the effects of the DHRA on the ability to obtain research permits before the Council makes any retention or sunset recommendation to the Regional Administrator.

Rationale: Unlike the Georges Bank DHRA, the Stellwagen DHRA has active ongoing and planned research. However, other designations that restrict fishing gears overlap the DHRA, so removal of the DHRA will not lift those restrictions. Given these overlapping management areas, the DHRA designation is not needed to create the controlled conditions for the research.

¹ See OHA2 FEIS Volume 4, Section 3.2.4. The DHRA area was formerly the Closed Area I South Habitat Closure. The area is predominantly high energy sand, with good data support for that classification, and lower vulnerability to trawls.

Therefore, the restrictions from the DHRA designation are duplicative and not in the best interests of the fishing community.

Note: The portion of the motion related to the DHRA enhancing a researcher's ability to obtain permits was added via friendly amendment.

Discussion on the Motion:

- The AP Chair asked whether the existence of the DHRA has any impact on the permitting process and/or indicates that the Council encourages habitat research in the area. While this is not explicitly one of the retention criteria, it could be informative for understanding the value of the DHRA designation for research. Council and GARFO plan to follow up on this question.
- One AP member agreed with the rationale on overlapping designations but also noted that the Council originally selected Stellwagen DHRA in part to leverage the existing fishing restrictions in the area. The AP member also noted that, from Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary's perspective, the area is important for habitat research, as is encouraging research in the area.

Public Comment:

- **Sue Tuxbury (GARFO, Habitat and Ecosystem Services Division)** responded that GARFO staff will look into the permitting process and effect of the DHRA on that process and follow up with Council staff / the group.

MOTION #2 CARRIED BY UNANIMOUS CONSENT

AGENDA ITEM #3: GREAT SOUTH CHANNEL HABITAT MANAGEMENT AREA SURFLAM EXEMPTION PROGRAM EVALUATION

Council staff gave a presentation on the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (GSC HMA) surfclam exemption program evaluation, which is a Council work priority for 2026 and will be carried out by Council staff with the assistance of the Habitat PDT. Staff emphasized that the evaluation will focus on scientific and fishery information that has emerged since the Council took final action on the Clam Dredge Framework in 2018. Staff explained how the exemption program evaluation is intended to fit into the Council's work prioritization process: the Habitat Committee and Council will have opportunities to discuss throughout the summer and into the fall. Then, at its September meeting, the Council will receive the evaluation report and have an initial priorities discussion in advance of voting on final 2027 work priorities at the December Council meeting.

Council staff reviewed information about the GSC HMA surfclam exemption program, including program objectives, and the types of information to be included in the evaluation. Specifically, evaluation of habitat and managed species will include information on habitat conditions, species-specific habitat use, Atlantic cod spawning, effects of fishing gear, and surfclam resource conditions in the exemption areas. Additionally, surfclam fishery information will include effort, landings, and revenue data; fleet characterization; and overall surfclam fishery trends for context. The program review will not explicitly consider the effectiveness of the Rose & Crown and Davis Bank East research area designation or revisit research objectives. Instead, the review will consider the findings of research projects in these areas to the extent that they inform understanding of habitat, the surfclam resource, or natural disturbance regimes in the GSC HMA and their relationships with fishing disturbance. Council staff posed several questions relating to habitat conservation and the surfclam fishery yield to guide AP discussion.

The AP Chair emphasized the focus on the habitat conservation and surfclam fishery facets of the evaluation. One AP member sought clarification on the use of gear and assumptions that went into past management actions, noting that some areas may be defacto closed areas if substrate types preclude the use of specific types of gears. The AP member encouraged staff to include an analysis of those gear-use

assumptions and provide updates on the frequency, intensity, and duration of habitat impacts to ensure those factors are still relevant. Council staff appreciated the suggestion and will further explore relationships between habitat and fishing gear types. Staff noted that, hopefully, the more frequent Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) pings combined with multibeam bathymetry maps will provide clarity on the distribution of fishing by habitat type. Another AP member encouraged staff and the Council to engage with surfclam stakeholders in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Public Comment

- There were no public comments on the pre-motion AP discussion of the GSC HMA surfclam exemption evaluation.

3. AP MOTION: MINKIEWICZ / BRAGDON

That the Habitat Advisory Panel recommend that the Habitat Committee direct the Plan Development Team, in conducting the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area Surfclam Exemption Program Evaluation, to:

- (1) Expand the scope of the evaluation to include habitat and surfclam resource conditions in portions of the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area outside the McBlair, Old South, and Fishing Rip exemption areas.
- (2) Examine the science supporting the original Great South Channel Habitat Management Area designation in Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2, including whether the productivity rationale advanced for protection of complex benthic habitat important for juvenile cod and other groundfish has been borne out by evidence developed since 2018.
- (3) Treat the natural disturbance regime of the Great South Channel as a central analytical input, including an assessment of whether gear impact recovery times on this seabed are shorter than, comparable to, or longer than the natural disturbance return interval.
- (4) Incorporate the Coonamessett Farm Foundation multibeam sonar, drop camera, and compensation fishing research outputs as primary data on habitat condition and recovery, rather than as contextual background.
- (5) Examine updated cod spawning timing and location evidence relative to the boundaries and seasonal structure of the existing exemption areas.

Rationale: This motion aims to help focus the discussion on scoping and tasking activities for the surfclam exemption program evaluation. The intent is to solicit input from the Habitat AP and members of the public on these review directions, to ensure that the evaluation covers all the necessary information and includes the voices of various stakeholders who have provided comments on this issue.

Discussion on the Motion:

- AP Members generally concurred that the motion raised important questions, some of which may be challenging to answer, but were also concerned about whether they fell within the scope of the evaluation and about staff capacity to carry out an expanded evaluation.
 - Council staff appreciated the importance of considering these questions and responded that they plan to generally address them through the evaluation. Staff noted that it could be worth doing initial investigations to identify information that is currently available versus additional information and work needed to fully complete the motion's expanded scoping request. Staff emphasized that they would explore these directions to the best of their ability and as time allows but may need to temper expectations of what is feasible. Finally, staff noted that the Council could request additional analysis after they review the report in September.
- One AP member suggested the motion may be expanding the evaluation to a level of scoping seen in an Omnibus Habitat Amendment and thus require a shift of Council priorities.

- The AP Chair suggested checking in with project leads at UMass Dartmouth/SMAST who are conducting research on cod spawning in the surfclam exemption area, noting that there has been some trawl survey activity related to wind projects south of the area, while other projects in the New England Wind Energy area may have halted.
- The AP Chair asked when to expect the final report from Coonamessett Farm Foundation's (CFF) multibeam sonar work. Council staff responded that they had last received a progress update in the fall and expect the final report sometime in the summer, which CFF staff confirmed.
- The AP Chair also clarified the process for this motion's request: if the motion passes, it would go to the Habitat Committee to discuss and decide how to task the Habitat PDT. The Chair suggested examining each of five requests more closely and carefully considering what is within and outside the scope of the evaluation.
 - The maker of the motion clarified that, while the motion is ambitious, the intent is to identify what information and analyses are available and feasible rather than expect that everything requested be completed.
- One AP member clarified with staff whether the upcoming June meetings would be in person or as a webinar. Staff responded that the Habitat Committee meeting will be a webinar, but the Council meeting will be in person with a webinar option.
- Council staff noted that, following the GARFO data pull for surfclam fishery dependent data, staff will identify remaining questions and carry the AP discussion and other information forward to the Habitat Committee.

Public Comment:

- **Ron Smolowitz and Natalie Jennings (Coonamessett Farm Foundation, CFF)** clarified that the report will be available before the end of summer, ideally by July 31.
- **Mr. Smolowitz** also expressed support for the motion because it raises a number of specific questions concerning the level of information needed to address whether there are adverse impacts of clam dredge fishing to cod spawning habitat in the area. He noted that the GSC HMA is an important area because of sediment and oceanographic conditions, but its importance for key species like cod (e.g., for spawning) is mainly based on historical information. Mr. Smolowitz also was concerned that there are processes not being accounted for in Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) and other management decisions, such as consumptive and behavioral effects of seal predation on groundfish and emphasized that clam dredge impacts are ameliorated by tidal cycles due to the high-energy nature of the area.
- **Shaun Gehan (Counsel for the Saving Surfcalm Coalition)** echoed Mr. Minkeiwicz's rationale and noted there has been much interest from the surfclam industry to get this area reopened. Mr. Gehan emphasized Mr. Smolowitz's point about the historical importance of the area for cod spawning, which may have changed in recent years. Mr. Gehan also noted that, while the area is likely designated as EFH for many species, under the Magnuson-Stevens Act EFH only needs to be protected to the extent that there is an adverse impact and to the extent practicable. Given the high-energy nature of the area, adverse impacts from clam dredging seem to be temporary. Mr. Gehan encouraged staff to include specific descriptions of habitat usage and to consider the footprint and impacts of the surfclam fishery relative to managed species habitat and natural disturbance regimes.
- **Peter Hughes (Atlantic Cape Fisheries, Scallop AP member)** supported the motion, noting the importance of these questions and acknowledging that some may be more challenging to answer than others.
- **Sam Martin (Atlantic Harvesters)** noted that surfclam catch rates are down 75% of what they used to be and that the predominantly boulder substrate of the Fishing Rip area precludes fishing. Mr. Martin echoed prior comments about historical cod spawning protections no longer being

valid and emphasized that keeping the area closed requires proper evaluation of the habitat and surfclam conditions.

- **Monte Rome (Intershell International Corp.)** expressed support for the motion and questioned the productivity of the area, noting that most clams being caught are out of the Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) allowance. Mr. Rome reiterated that clam dredge impacts are negligible relative to natural disturbances.
- **Dr. Roger Mann (Virginia Institute of Marine Science, VIMS)** strongly endorsed the motion and offered to provide information from his lab.
- **Allen Rencurrel (Nantucket Sound Seafood)** supported the motion, noting that there has only been one EFP boat in the last seven years of EFPs and that there is more research that needs to be done to evaluate this closure.

MOTION #3 CARRIED ON A SHOW OF HANDS (5/2/0)

AGENDA ITEM #4: 2026 ESSENTIAL FISH HABITAT DESIGNATION UPDATES

Council staff gave a presentation on the 2026 Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) designation updates and Framework, which is slated for final action in September. Staff provided background on EFH and an overview of the 2026 EFH Designation Framework, which will update EFH designations (maps and text descriptions) for 16 Council-managed species: Acadian redfish, American plaice, Atlantic halibut, Atlantic sea scallop, Atlantic wolffish, haddock, ocean pout, offshore hake, pollock, red hake, silver hake, white hake, windowpane flounder, winter flounder, witch flounder, and yellowtail flounder. Like the 2025 EFH Framework, this year's action will likely consist of a no-action alternative that maintains the current designations from Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2 and a single action alternative that updates EFH designations for the 16 species.

Staff reviewed the workflow and designation methods, which rely on the predictive outputs of species distribution models (SDMs) coupled with non-modeled, inshore methods. The SDMs model relationships between species counts data from fisheries-independent trawl surveys and environmental covariates to predict relative species density throughout the region. Staff noted that separate, species-specific models are in development for scallops, wolffish, and offshore hake owing to unique data limitations and/or modeling needs. The other 13 species are modeled simultaneously in a joint hurdle SDM; hurdle models account for the skewed distribution of fisheries data by combining presence-absence and abundance components into a single model. The non-modeled pathway identifies suitable estuarine and coastal areas by overlaying species occurrence data from inshore surveys on salinity-based zones. Council staff also reviewed the process for updating EFH text descriptions from the EFH maps and other information sources as well as the process for soliciting feedback on draft designations. This feedback process aims to identify gaps in the draft maps, text, or information sources and will occur throughout the summer.

Given time limitations in the meeting, staff reviewed draft designations in detail for three example species (juvenile Acadian redfish, adult scallops, pooled juvenile and adult pollock), and AP discussion focused mainly on the EFH designation methods and feedback process. One AP member suggested giving a similar overview presentation to the scallop AP and asked for clarification on how generous the inshore methods are with respect to the designation coverage. Staff responded that, based on conversations with EFH consultations staff, the methods err on the side of being more inclusive with estuary and coastal zones given that there is more uncertainty and the available data represent a snapshot of salinity conditions and species occurrence throughout the year. Staff are unsure whether there is a more concrete way to quantify that uncertainty but will explain this rationale in the framework document. The AP Chair asked how staff plan to identify scientific, industry, or other species experts beyond those in the PDTs and APs. Staff responded that they are seeking input from PDTs and APs on additional people to consult and are hoping that will cast a wide enough net for outreach between staff, PDT, AP, and Council networks. Staff also expect updated outreach materials, including EFH primers and the EFH Demo R Shiny app (for

interactive viewing), to be available for distribution in June and will plan to do additional outreach. Staff encouraged AP members to reach out with specific feedback on designations for other species besides the examples shown during the meeting.

Public Comment

- **Ron Smolowitz (Coonamesett Farm Foundation)** was concerned that the EFH designation methods did not examine data from other seasons (e.g., for Atlantic cod) beyond those sampled in the trawl surveys (predominantly spring and fall) to confirm whether fish actually use areas broadly defined as EFH. Mr. Smolowitz had made this comment at a previous meeting but felt it had not been addressed. Mr. Smolowitz also suggested that the PDT examine fisheries-dependent catch data or explicitly state caveats with respect to data or factors not considered in the analyses (i.e., predation, commercial catch data, etc.).
 - Council staff responded that the designation methods presented to the Council during the 2025 EFH Review and 2025 EFH Framework focused on SDM approaches based on spring and fall fisheries-independent survey data but did not directly incorporate commercial catch data. Staff do not have a specific plan or capacity for deep dives into sources of commercial data but could look into whether there are existing footprints over the last 20-25 years to compare against the draft EFH maps and identify any gaps. Staff will also ensure caveats identified in the framework and methods appendix be included in presentations for upcoming meetings.

AGENDA ITEM #5: OTHER BUSINESS

The AP Chair noted that Jenny Couture (NEFMC, Habitat staff) tracks ocean planning issues and has previously provided updates at AP and Committee meetings. The Chair was curious whether there would be updates on proposed mussel farm project and offshore wind (OSW) activities presented at the June 12 Habitat Committee meeting, noting that while there has been less OSW activity recently, there seem to be numerous funded research projects, some of which are habitat-based. One AP member noted that for the scallop community and Research Set Aside (RSA) Program, there are RSA share days, which are scheduled meetings dedicated to presentations on RSA findings; periodic habitat research share days could be helpful for members of the AP, Committee, and public to digest new habitat information. The AP Chair recognized that it may be a while before research findings are available on OSW projects but nonetheless appreciated the suggestion and encouraged the group to consider it in the future. Another AP member clarified the distinction between the Responsible Offshore Development Alliance (RODA) and the Responsible Offshore Science Alliance (ROSA), noting that the latter stays informed on ongoing and completed research projects and that it could be useful for Tricia Perez (ROSA) to provide an update to the group.

Public Comment

- There were no public comments on this agenda item.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 1:00 p.m.