New England Fishery Management Council
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MEMORANDUM

DATE: **November 12, 2026**

TO: Executive Committee

FROM: Executive Director, Cate O'Keefe

SUBJECT: **2027 Council Priorities – Executive Director Recommendations**

Background and Process

The Council's annual Priority Setting process is conducted each fall including an initial presentation of draft priority proposals at the September Council meeting, input from Plan Development Teams, Advisory Panels, and Committees, recommendations from the Executive Director to the Executive Committee, recommendations from the Executive Committee to the Council, and final action to approve priorities at the December Council meeting. This memo and the accompanying "2027 Proposed Priorities" and "2027 Recommended Priorities – ED to Ex Com" tables provide information to support the Executive Committee's development of recommendations for the Council at the December 2026 meeting. The 2027 Priority Recommendations documents will be updated for the Council meeting to reflect the Executive Committee recommendations.

Document Description

The accompanying tables include the following:

- Ref #
  - This is a reference number for each proposed priority, which includes letters referring to Fishery Management Plans (FMP) or topics and a number for each.
- Plan/Topic
  - This describes the overarching FMP or topic for the range of proposed priorities.
- Category
  - This describes the nature of the priorities listed:
    - Required – task is required and will be included in 2027 work plans;
    - Ongoing – task is an ongoing commitment from the Council or was previously approved by the Council, is underway, and will be included in 2027 work plans; and
    - New – new task identified in response to 2026 Council actions and issues.
- Type
  - This describes the nature of Council work to be conducted:
    - Consultation, Action, Contract, Staff Task, Outreach, Support, etc.

- Priority/Task
    - This is a description of the priorities under consideration.
- Estimated Timing
    - This is an estimate of completion time for the task, including the year of completion or a description of single and multiyear tasks.
- Coordination
    - This shows overlapping efforts between FMPs and other activities.
- Staff Months
    - This is an estimate of total staff months required to complete items.

Executive Director Recommendations

The Executive Director's recommendations are based on a range of criteria including staff resources, Council capacity for preparation, regulatory requirements, and available information to support development of management actions.

Resources

In the coming year, the Council will face challenges matching tasks to the available staff time. The Executive Director's recommendations, which include required elements to meet MSA mandates, Inflation Reduction Act projects, which must be completed by 2027 funding deadlines, and the Council's September 30, 2025, and September 30, 2026, responses to Executive Order 14276, attempt to align with available staff resources. For some tasks, it may be possible to augment available resources with contract assistance; this will reduce, but not eliminate, staff capacity constraints.

On average, accounting for holidays, leave, and unplanned activities, individual staff members are available for ~10 months of FMP/task-specific work. The Council has 13 technical staff members and anticipates hiring additional staff in 2027, for a total of ~135 staff months available to complete 2027 work priorities. In the development of the Council's Holistic Strategic Plan, the Executive Committee recommended that Council priorities should align with ~80-90% of available annual staff time to account for unforeseen events. For 2027, 90% of available resources equals ~122 staff months.

The list below details the Executive Director's (ED) recommendations for all proposed priorities with specific information for "New" items; red text indicates ED recommended items to be included in 2027 work priorities. The Executive Committee's recommendations should clarify the objectives and scope of items to the extent possible.

Required/Ongoing Priorities

- There are **44 listed "Required" or "Ongoing"** priority items totaling 93 staff months. **The ED recommends prioritizing all these items, which include the following:**
    - EO14276 topics that the Council voted to approve in September 2026;
    - IRA initiatives 1-6 to be completed by December 31, 2027;
    - Regulatory measures for specifications and multiyear actions for several FMPs, including Groundfish, Scallops, Herring, Whiting, and Red Crab; and
    - Ongoing support for the SSC, NTAP, and other Inter-Agency activities.

Executive Director: Recommended New Priorities

- Executive Order 14276
  - **EO1/6/11: Review of habitat management across GB/SNE/GSC**
    - EO1: Implement rotational scallop access on the Northern Edge
      - NOAA Fisheries requested that the Council consider an action to create a scallop rotational access program on the Northern Edge in a letter dated July 2, 2026.
    - EO6: Consider reopening the Great South Channel HMA to surfclams
      - In December 2025, the Council prioritized an "Evaluation of the Great South Channel HMA surclam exemption areas" noting stakeholder interest in the topic and completion of multiyear EFP research projects. Council staff presented evaluation results in September 2026 indicating that potential revisions may be warranted.
    - EO11: Revise exemption areas (e.g., seasons, boundaries, gear-specific)
      - The Council identified "Southern New England Dogfish Gillnet Exemption Area Management Revisions" in their September 30, 2025, response to EO 14276. In December 2025, the Council recognized that exemption area revisions require coordination across multiple FMPs and recommended a multiyear proposal to be coordinated with holistic area management strategies and overarching FMP revisions.

  - **The ED recommends prioritizing a holistic review of Habitat Management Areas across Georges Bank, the Great South Channel, and Southern New England as a 2027 priority to address the interrelated habitat topics.**
    - New information related to Atlantic cod stock structure, Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) designations, scallop population dynamics (e.g., 2025 Research Track Assessment), and fishery behaviors (e.g., spatiotemporal behavior in the whiting, monkfish, skate, and dogfish fisheries) is available since the previous evaluation of habitat management needs under Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2 (NEFMC, 2018).
    - Conducting a review of habitat management measures based on new and available information may lead to Council action to revise Habitat Management Areas, which could better inform fishery objectives and follow-on actions for specific FMPs (e.g., scallop rotational areas).
    - Additionally, a holistic review of habitat management measures could increase efficiency in the Council process to consider potential revisions for fishery access compared to multiple FMP-specific actions that would need to consider habitat management simultaneously to fishing activity measures.
    - The estimated timing for a holistic GB/GSC/SNE habitat management review is 9 staff months in 2027. The Council should consider a focused and repeatable range of objectives for the review.

- **EO5: Revise vessel baseline restrictions**
  - The Council identified "Modifications to Vessel Baseline Restrictions" in their September 30, 2025, response to EO 14276. In December 2025, the Council prioritized a coordinated approach with GARFO and MAFMC to review existing vessel baseline restrictions.
  - Council staff presented evaluation results in September 2026 indicating that potential revisions may be warranted. In October 2026, MAFMC initiated an action to move forward with vessel baseline revisions.

- **The ED recommends prioritizing an action to revise vessel baseline restrictions in 2027.**
  - This would be a joint action with the MAFMC and support from GARFO.
  - The estimated timing for this action is 4 months in 2027. The Council may consider requesting that the MAFMC take the lead on the action; however, the Council should provide recommendations about the objectives and scope (e.g., limited to the current baseline measures of length and horsepower).

- **EO9: Revisions to Accountability Measures**
  - The Council identified "Revisions to Accountability Measures" in their September 30, 2025, response to EO 14276. In December 2025, the Council recognized a lack of capacity for 2026 activities but emphasized the importance of the topic as a near-term priority.
  - The Council proposed an evaluation of the effectiveness of pound-for-pound paybacks, and subsequently, they requested review of stock-specific area/gear measures, which potentially result in economic hardship.

- **The ED recommends prioritizing a review of Accountability Measure provisions across all FMPS starting in 2027.**
  - The estimated timing for this effort is 4 months in 2027 across multiple FMPs with recommended multiyear activity for potential Council action in 2028 and beyond.

- Groundfish
  - **G7: Revisions to Amendment 23 monitoring system**
    - In December 2025, the Council prioritized a systematic review of the A23 monitoring program. Council staff presented evaluation results in June 2026 indicating that potential revisions may be warranted, but the Council did not specify topics.
    - In their July 2, 2026, letter, NOAA Fisheries offered to collaborate with the Council to minimize costs and look at alternatives that may relieve the industry of the burden of monitoring in the groundfish.
    - Following the September 2026 Council meeting, the Northeast Fisheries Science Center Social Science Branch offered to assist the Council with a cost-benefit analysis of the groundfish sector at-sea monitoring (ASM) program.

- **The ED recommends prioritizing collaboration with NEFSC and GARFO to evaluate program costs and consider revised target coverage levels in 2027.**
    - The estimate timing for this effort is 1 month in 2027. Regional NOAA partners have committed to collaborate on cost/affordability analyses and revisions to coverage targets to extend existing programmatic funds.

- **G8/SK1: Define Ecosystem Component status by completing the EC Screening Guidance; initiate Council action as needed**
    - Through IRA Initiative #3, the Council has developed a Guidance Process to screen for potential Ecosystem Component Species designation. The EC screening process guidance document will be finalized in December 2026 to inform candidate EC stocks in 2027 for groundfish and skates.
    - Recently, the Council and SSC, as well as other collaborating groups (e.g., CCC, NRCC, TMGC) have endorsed consideration of designating NEFMC managed stocks as ECs following National Standard Guidelines and the Council's EC Guidance Process.

- **The ED recommends prioritizing definition of EC stock status by completing the EC Screening Guidance and initiating Council actions as needed.**
    - The screening may be applied to groundfish and skate stocks within the Northeast Multispecies and Skate Complex FMPs.
    - Screening includes stocks/species that are currently included in FMPs (e.g., windowpane flounder, ocean pout, etc.) as well as species/stocks that are not included but may benefit from NEFMC management (e.g., cusk, sandlance).
    - The estimated timing for this effort is 6 months in 2027 with recommended multiyear activity for potential action in 2027/2028.

- <u>Scallop</u>
    - **SC7/9: 2027 Scallop Strategic Plan Menu Items**
        - SC7: Joint PDT/AP Working Group White Paper on improving fishing practices, including defining high grading
            - This topic was identified with broad support through the Scallop Visioning Sessions conducted in 2025.
            - In August/September 2026, the Scallop AP and Committee emphasized the need to review and potentially revise measures around fishing practices, especially in rotational access areas.
        - SC8: Support external projects: in-season triggers, real-time data applications
            - Ongoing and recently funded RSA initiatives have requested participation and input from Council staff. These initiatives have identified management on-ramps for future Council consideration.

    - **The ED recommends prioritizing staff resources to support ongoing activities.**
        - The estimated timing for these efforts is 2 months in 2027.

- Habitat
  - **HA4: Revise EFH designations for deep-sea red crab and Atlantic salmon**
    - The Council prioritized EFH review and redesignation of all managed species in 2024 under a multiyear priority. The Council approved actions in 2025 and 2026 to designate updated EFH for all species except for deep-sea red crab and salmon.
    - There is limited new information for red crab and salmon EFH designation, but a review of available data is required.

  - **The ED recommends prioritizing staff resources to review available information related to deep-sea red crab and Atlantic salmon EFH.**
    - These species would not be evaluated through dedicated advanced methods but may be updated through upcoming actions (e.g., red crab specifications for 2028-2032).
    - The estimated timing for these efforts is 0.5 months in 2027.

- Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC)
  - **SSC3: Support SSC Workgroup on Dynamic Reference Points**
    - Through IRA Initiative #3, the SSC participated in a June 2026 workshop dedicated to advancing understanding and application of dynamic reference points (DRPs) for the New England region.
    - The SSC made a consensus recommendation to the Council in September 2026 to advance a screening process for NEFMC managed stocks that may be candidates for dynamic reference point consideration.
    - The SSC requested that the Council consider prioritizing activities by a dedicated sub-group to advance research and application of DRPs.

  - **The ED recommends prioritizing staff and SSC resources to advance Dynamic Reference Point applications for NEFMC managed stocks.**
    - Most of the activity and work responsibilities would be assigned to SSC members and collaborating NEFSC partners. Council staff time would be dedicated to supporting the working group and facilitating public outreach/information opportunities, including the full Council.
    - The estimated timing for these efforts is 2 months in 2027.

Executive Director: Not Recommended

- Executive Order 14276
  - EO1: Implement rotational scallop access on the Northern Edge
  - EO6: Consider reopening the Great South Channel HMA to surfclams
  - EO11: Revise exemption areas (e.g., seasons, boundaries, gear-specific)
    - See above recommended approach to combine topics under overarching habitat management review.
  - **The ED recommends that these topics are considered holistically through a habitat review in 2027.**

- Groundfish
    - G6: Revisions to redfish sector exemption program
        - In December 2025, the Council prioritized "Review of redfish sector exemption program" noting the requirement to complete a program review following a redfish stock assessment. Council staff presented evaluation results in June 2026 indicating that potential revisions may not be warranted in the near-term.
    - **The ED recommends that the redfish sector exemption program continues without revision in 2027.**

- Scallop
    - SC8: Scallop Strategic Plan Menu Items: Review of automated detection
        - Advancing the application of automated technology to process optical scallop survey information is a high priority for the Council and NOAA partners. However, the SSC lacks the expertise to conduct a review of this technology.
    - **The ED recommends that NOAA consider appropriate alternative review bodies.**

- Herring
    - HE2: A10 to minimize user conflicts, achieve OY, and support rebuilding of the herring resource
        - A10 was initiated in September 2023 based on litigated rejection of portions of A8. Since 2023, the scope of A10 has expanded and contracted, been paused and reprioritized, and suffered from a lack of clear definition. A12 to the Atlantic Herring FMP has been initiated to address river herring and shad bycatch measures, which is considered a "Required" 2027 Council priority.
    - **The ED recommends Council action to discontinue A10.**

Synthesis

Required and ongoing priorities are estimated at 93 staff months; ED recommended New priority activities add 28 staff months, totaling 121 staff months. This estimate aligns with ~90% of available Council staff time in 2027 (135 total months). Following the Council's recently adopted Holistic Strategic Plan, the ED proposes that 2027 priority activities should not exceed 90% of estimated staff capacity. The ED also emphasizes that staff capacity is one of several factors that need to be considered in setting the Council's annual workload. The full Council meets five times per year and relies on recommendations from FMP Advisory Panels and Committees. The overarching Council system (i.e., PDT, AP, CTE, Council, fishing industry, and other community stakeholders), as well as NOAA partners (e.g., NEFSC, GARFO, Headquarters) also have capacity limits.

The ED strongly recommends that the Executive Committee consider whole-system capacity in their review of annual work priorities. Additionally, the Executive Committee should consider their leadership role in implementing the Strategic Plan's guidance to "build consensus to prioritize top management needs."