

# New England Fishery Management Council IRA Portfolio Status Report

August 2025

## List of IRA-funded initiatives and projects

1. ABC Control Rule Simulation Testing / Risk Policy Evaluation
2. Atlantic Cod Management Transition
3. Operationalizing Ecosystem Approaches
  - 3.1. Mechanisms to include ecosystem information in Council decisions
  - 3.2. Dynamic reference points
  - 3.3. Ecosystem Component Species Evaluation
4. Operationalizing the East Coast Scenario Planning Initiative
  - 4.1. Advisory body evaluation, use, and decision making
  - 4.2. Joint management agreements to improve efficiency
  - 4.3. Review regional operating agreements
  - 4.4. Portfolio analysis
5. Holistic Strategic Plan
6. Enhancing participatory processes
  - 6.1. Artificial Intelligence Training and Implementation
  - 6.2. Social Media / Online Communication to enhance public participation

## Current Progress Toward Stated Goals and Objectives

- Program planning and organizational tasks have been completed:
  - Council staff have been assigned to all initiatives and projects
  - Templates have been developed to facilitate RFP evaluations, preparation of project action plans, contract milestone tracking, and workshop budgeting
  - Outreach materials such as project briefs and timelines have been prepared and updated
  - Staff effort (hours) and budget tracking are ongoing
- Major analytical contracts have been awarded and are underway (see below)
- Oversight teams have been formed for most projects, consisting of staff, contractors, and Climate and Ecosystem Steering Committee members

- Council staff are planning the specific timing and logistics of 2026 workshops, working with contractors as appropriate
- Staff and contractors are providing updates to and seeking feedback from the Council, Climate and Ecosystem Steering Committee, and other groups as needed

#### Next steps

- Consider necessary facilitation contracts for various workshops (see next section) and prepare RFPs
- Establish workshop steering committees and augment project oversight teams as needed
- Consider alignment of project timelines with future Committee and Council workplans to ensure capacity to apply project results to management actions
- Consider a path forward for Initiative 2, Atlantic Cod Management Transition

## Update on Procurement Contracts (Subawards and Consultants)

The Council has five active contracts supporting our IRA portfolio.

- ***Evaluating the Council's New Risk Policy and Development of Groundfish Acceptable Biological Catch Control Rules.*** Supporting IRA 1 and IRA 3.1. Awarded to the University of Maine (Dr. Lisa Kerr). Performance period March 17, 2025 – March 1, 2026. Not to exceed \$227,036.
- ***Developing a Holistic Strategic Plan for Climate-Resilient New England Fisheries Management.*** Supporting IRA 5, IRA 4.1, IRA 4.2. Awarded to The Parnin Group, with a sub-award to Lynker Corporation (Brett Wiedoff). Performance period March 10, 2025 – April 1, 2026. Not to exceed \$372,898.
- ***Portfolio Approach to Inform New England Fisheries Management.*** Supporting IRA 4.4. Awarded to the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (Dr. Luran Brewster). Performance period April 1, 2025 – June 30, 2027. Not to exceed \$214,928.
- ***Operationalizing Ecosystem Approaches and Enhancing Participatory Processes for Climate-Resilient Fisheries Management in New England.*** Supporting IRA 1, IRA 2, IRA 4.3, IRA 6. Awarded to Maris Collaborative (Angelia Miller). Performance period July 14, 2025 – June 30, 2026. Not to exceed \$170,000.
- ***Assessing Marine Fish Habitat and Distribution using Community-Level Basis Function Modeling (CBFM) in the Northeast Region.*** Supporting IRA 4.1, 4.4.

Awarded to Monmouth University (Dr. Chris Haak). Performance period January 1 – December 31, 2025. Not to exceed \$66,785 from IRA funds.

Additional contracts are likely needed to support facilitation of workshops and/or focus groups. IRA funds will also be used for meeting space, Council and SSC member stipends, staff time, and travel.

- Workshop with the Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee to develop guidance and best management practices related to dynamic reference points (IRA 3.2). Target workshop date March 2026.
- Workshops or focus groups with groundfish sector participants to identify opportunities for improving management outcomes and resilience in the fishery (IRA 2). Targeting workshops during second half of calendar year 2026.
- Workshops or focus groups with northeast fishery permit holders to explore opportunities for modernizing the permit system (IRA 4.4). Could be an adjustment to existing University of Massachusetts contract as it will build on and inform the portfolio analysis project. Targeting workshops during first half of calendar year 2026.
- Joint East Coast governance workshops on advisory body use and joint management arrangements (targeting January or February 2026 for workshop 1, and summer 2026 for workshop 2). The Mid-Atlantic Council will support facilitation costs for these meetings, and the South Atlantic Council will provide logistical support for workshop 1. Additional analytical contract support to prepare for workshop 2 may be required; this will be determined after the Holistic Strategic Plan contract is completed.
- Workshop to review and update the Council’s operating agreement with NOAA Fisheries (IRA 4.3). Targeting workshop during first half of calendar year 2027. This workshop may be bundled with an existing Northeast Regional Coordinating Council meeting to save costs.
- The Council also plans to train staff through a contract or training facility to improve operational efficiencies using artificial intelligence (IRA 6.1).

## Implementation Challenges or Changes to the Budget

- **Dependencies on other Council work:** IRA Initiative 2 was intended to focus on management changes needed to support transition to four Atlantic cod stocks vs. the current two stock structure in U.S. waters. The Council’s Fishery Management Plan Amendment 25 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP was disapproved by NOAA

Fisheries. While this action is being prepared for resubmission, the timing and eventual outcome of this review is unclear. This delays our ability to plan for focus groups or workshops, and potentially changes the scope of these workshops, if the transition to a four-stock system is not eventually approved. These funds could be redirected towards other groundfish management challenges.

- **Administration priorities:** Staff have been working to address administration priorities such as a response to E.O. 14276, diverting time away from assigned IRA responsibilities. One of our initiatives as initially proposed focused on issues of equity and representation in the management process. We have pivoted away from this focus and have had to rethink how to accomplish the objectives of this initiative, which are to enhance participation in the Council's management process. Additionally, reductions in staffing and budget capacity for NOAA Fisheries has increased workloads for Council staff, as well as impacted anticipated NOAA products related to climate change and environmental factors that were anticipated to support the Council's IRA initiatives.
- The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission is a partner on several IRA projects of the three east coast Councils, but they did not receive IRA funds and are therefore supporting this work through their normal operating budget.
- Initial distribution of IRA funds to the Council was later than originally anticipated.

## Upcoming Revision Requests in eRA Grants Management System

- None at this time.

## Questions/Lessons Learned

- **Lesson learned (recommendation for future grants to Councils):** IRA Initiative 4 addresses priorities identified through the East Coast Scenario Planning Initiative. This was a joint initiative between three Councils (New England, Mid-Atlantic, South Atlantic), the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, and NOAA Fisheries. All three Councils have been awarded funds to address scenario planning priorities. While some of this work is necessarily individual to each organization, it would have been more straightforward if the Councils had been able to submit a combined proposal for a joint series of governance workshops. Given that all Councils received funds for such meetings, we are dividing facilitation and logistical costs among ourselves.

- **Lesson learned (internal):** At any given time the Council has not managed this number of external contracts and special projects. A benefit of needing to administer this portfolio is that we have improved our internal systems and processes for this sort of work. Further organizational improvements are expected during the performance period of this grant. In addition, all Council staff have been able to engage in the IRA portfolio and build capacity for managing contracts and special projects.