



New England Fishery Management Council

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 8, 2025
TO: Habitat Committee, Habitat Advisory Panel
FROM: Michelle Bachman, Julian Garrison, and Jenny Couture, Habitat and Ocean Planning Staff
SUBJECT: Potential Essential Fish Habitat and Ocean Planning Work for 2026

The purpose of this memo is to identify potential 2026 work areas related to essential fish habitat (EFH) and ocean planning and seek Committee and Advisory Panel guidance on how to focus and manage these efforts. Currently, a single EFH designation framework is anticipated for 2026 (for a subset of NEFMC managed species), along with continued staff work on habitat and ocean planning issues. These are not new priorities but rather they represent a continuation of previous priorities. In addition to these activities, the Council's habitat and ocean planning staff are involved in other fishery management plan work and climate-resilient fisheries projects funded through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). There are relationships between EFH and certain climate-resilient fisheries projects in that they both use results of the species distribution models initially developed to support EFH designations. If the Council identifies other work priorities for 2026 involving the same staff, Plan Development Team, Committee, Advisory Panel, or contractor resources, the level of effort put towards some of these 2026 activities may need to be reconsidered.

2025 Habitat and Ocean Planning Work

In December 2024, the Council prioritized five work areas related to EFH and ocean planning. A summary of work completed during 2025 under each priority is provided in Table 1. This table also describes work completed during the final months of the EFH Five-Year review, which concluded in early 2025.

Table 1. Work completed during 2025 to support the Council's EFH and Ocean Planning priorities.

Priority	Work completed 2025
EFH 5-Year Review	Finalized technical reports for nine review components, prepared summary report, presented reports to Habitat Committee, Habitat Advisory Panel, Council. Communicated review to NOAA GARFO, updated website.
Update EFH designations	The 2025 EFH Framework considers EFH designations for 10 of the 28 species managed by the New England Council, specifically Atlantic cod, Atlantic herring, monkfish, barndoor skate, clearnose skate, little skate, rosette skate, smooth skate, thorny skate, and winter skate. NEFMC staff worked collaboratively with MAFMC staff, a species distribution modeling contractor, Habitat Plan Development Team, and MAFMC EFH Fishery Management Action Team to refine EFH mapping and text description methods and to

Priority	Work completed 2025
	develop maps and text for ten NEFMC species. Habitat NEFMC staff shared draft EFH maps and text with groundfish, herring, monkfish, and skate PDTs and advisory panels and solicited feedback; their feedback was incorporated accordingly into designations. Staff prepared a framework document and associated analyses. Prior to the end of 2025, and pending Council action, NEFMC habitat staff will finalize and submit the framework document to NOAA GARFO.
Habitat impacts of management actions	No specific work between January-August; will review / prepare analyses in skate, monkfish, groundfish, and scallop actions before the end of 2025.
Develop habitat and fishery-related comments on non-fishing activities including offshore wind and aquaculture	Reduced effort in this area during 2025. Two letters prepared to date during 2025 (compared to seven letters in 2024). Staff will write a staff comment letter to NEFSC on the regional standards for offshore wind project level monitoring this fall in collaboration with MAFMC staff.
Foster and contribute to habitat science and management partnerships through participation in the CCC HWG, the ASMFC Habitat Committee, and ACFHP	Limited effort related to Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission Habitat Committee and Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership; no meetings scheduled from January through August 2025. Staff attended / chaired four CCC Habitat Work Group meetings through September 9 and provided an update on HWG activities during the May CCC meeting in New Bedford.
Collaborate on offshore wind science issues with ROSA, RODA, NMFS, BOEM, and others	Staff continued to collaborate with NOAA, offshore wind developers, and other groups on a more informal staff-to-staff level; fewer formal interactions since January.

The EFH Five-Year Review identified several potential near-, medium-, and longer-term actions related to the nine EFH components. The full list of actions is listed in Table at the end of this document. Work related to some of these actions was completed in 2025, specifically:

- Update species distribution models used for EFH identification, including refining the suite of environmental predictor variables, developing methods to identify more ecologically meaningful size-based or ontogenetic break points for partitioning habitat amongst distinct life stages, and integrating the results of multiple fishery independent surveys.
- Collaborate with NPFMC on development of infographics to explain the Fishing Effects Model to Council members and the public.

Other actions listed in Table are included in the 2026 work items described in the sections below.

Essential Fish Habitat description and identification – continued work in 2026

For 2026, Council staff recommend developing an action to update EFH designations for all species with species distribution models. Based on currently available model fits and an examination of information available for data-limited species, we anticipate that distribution models can be developed for all species listed in Table 2, with possible exception of Atlantic wolffish, since there are only ~250 wolffish records in the trawl survey time series since 2000. Some additional longline survey data may be available to describe wolffish distribution and abundance, but additional model development work would be required to integrate longline data with the trawl survey data given differences in catchability. If modeling approaches for wolffish are not possible, we can consider alternate approaches to updating the EFH designation for this species in order to complete EFH designation updates in the Northeast

Multispecies FMP through this framework.

Table 2. New England Council species (16) for which species distribution models are expected to be available to support EFH designation.

Fishery Management Plan	Species
Small Mesh FMP (3 species)	Red hake, silver hake, and offshore hake*;
Groundfish FMP (12 species)	Acadian redfish, American plaice, Atlantic halibut*, Atlantic wolffish**, Haddock, ocean pout, pollock, white hake, windowpane flounder, winter flounder, witch flounder, yellowtail flounder;
Atlantic Sea Scallop FMP	Atlantic sea scallop***

*Offshore hake and Atlantic halibut are somewhat data limited, with sufficient observations to model juveniles and adults in combination but not to run life stage-specific models.

**It is likely possible to fit a species distribution model for Atlantic wolffish, but this will almost certainly require a simplified modeling framework.

***EFH will rely on a scallop-specific vs. joint species distribution model, which is already under development.

Models cannot be fit for Atlantic salmon or deep-sea red crab based on available data. Therefore, we recommend deferring designation updates for salmon and red crab until 2027.

Previously, some of the large mesh species were going to be deferred until 2027 (Acadian redfish, American plaice, Atlantic halibut, Atlantic wolffish, ocean pout, pollock, white hake, and witch flounder) to evenly distribute efforts and to align with stock assessment schedules at the time. However, there is currently substantial momentum behind the model-based EFH work, and the Mid-Atlantic Council will continue work on their EFH Amendment into the first few months of 2026 (MAFMC final action is anticipated during April 2026). It would be useful to align the timeframes of continued EFH map development to take advantage of Mid-Atlantic Council staff and contractor availability. Additionally, given the nature of these workflows, developing all the remaining maps at once is more efficient and practical and leverages the considerable work that went into further developing and fine-tuning the designation methods this year.

The timing of EFH text description development is more flexible than map development, but relies on review of the model outputs and analysis of underlying survey data to estimate depth, temperature, and salinity ranges. Literature review also informs the text description updates. For some species, NEFMC staff can coordinate our literature review to support EFH text description updates with the Mid-Atlantic Council's EFH Source Document IRA contract. This contract will update detailed habitat information source documents for all Mid-Atlantic and New England Council species by 2027, with much of the work expected to be completed during 2026.

Similar to this year, Council staff will seek feedback on EFH maps and text descriptions from small mesh species, large mesh species, and scallop experts. During 2026, it will take incrementally more NEFMC staff, PDT, and Advisory Panel time and resources to review eight additional EFH designations (16 species total) vs. the eight originally planned for 2026 or the ten species revised during 2025. Coordination with the Small Mesh, Groundfish, and Scallop FMPs was already anticipated, so the primary change is that the Groundfish team would be asked to review designations for 12 species rather than four. We will work with the Groundfish plan coordinator to determine the most efficient approach for engaging species experts.

We expect this 2026 EFH work would be completed with a single joint framework developed through

the Habitat Committee / Advisory Panel, like the 2025 action.

Fishing Effects Analysis – continued work in 2026

We recommend 2026 activities that continue to advance Fishing Effects model analyses.

- Develop a workplan for updating the Fishing Effects analysis more routinely (the current model runs include data through 2023 and were updated as part of the EFH Five-Year Review).
- Consider sharing updated Fishing Effects model outputs through the ocean data portals.
- Consider a more detailed evaluation of Fishing Effects results at finer temporal (monthly) and spatial (sub-regions, management areas) scales to support an evaluation of the Councils' adverse effects minimization measures (per Omnibus Amendment 2, these minimization measures should be re-evaluated by 2028).
- Consider co-organizing a workshop with the New England, Mid-Atlantic, and North Pacific Fishery Management Council to advance Fishing Effects Model data inputs and methods.

Recently, habitat staff at both the New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils have been focused on the 2025 EFH designation updates, but once this work nears completion, staff should have more time to consider a plan for ongoing updates to the Fishing Effects analysis. This could include consideration of ways to represent the results at finer spatial and temporal scales. Omnibus EFH Amendment 2 envisioned a 10-year review of measures to minimize adverse effects; planning for these analyses in 2026 would set us up to begin that review around the ten-year mark (2028). Additionally, there may be opportunities to collaborate with the North Pacific Council on Fishing Effects model development and use, as they also rely on the Fishing Effects Model. Earlier this year, Council staff were beginning to plan for a workshop to review and advance methods across the North Pacific and Northeast regions, but have paused those conversations more recently given uncertainty about resource availability.

Integrate habitat information into Council initiatives

Products developed to support EFH designations and for the EFH review may be useful in other areas of the Council's work during 2026 and beyond. Staff can continue to seek opportunities to apply EFH information in various contexts. These opportunities include but are not limited to the following items.

- Consider how food habits information of Council-managed species can integrate with and/or inform Council initiatives. More specifically, food habits information might also be used during the ecosystem component species evaluation under IRA and may have other applications as well.
- Apply species distribution models used for EFH designation to climate-resilient fisheries projects. For example, species distribution models are going to be applied to three IRA-funded projects, specifically the ecosystem component species (IRA 3.1), the evaluation of advisory body use (IRA 4.1), and the portfolio analysis (IRA 4.4).

Communication and information sharing

The Council should continue to share habitat products during 2026. To date, we have distributed EFH review information via the Council's webpage, [Essential Fish Habitat \(EFH\) Information - Library - NEFMC](#). We have also shared online applications developed in R-Shiny, including the [NRHA Data Explorer](#), fishmaps.shinyapps.io/prey/, and fishmaps.shinyapps.io/FishingEffectsDatabase/#/. We recommend working towards a more formal roll-out of EFH Review products such as reports and R-Shiny applications. This should include proper documentation of methods and code in repositories such

as GitHub. This documentation work dovetails with automation work that is occurring under IRA Initiative 6, Enhancing Participatory Processes.

Continue to collaborate with partners on habitat and ocean planning science and management issues

Council staff are members of a variety of committees and working groups and collaborate with multiple different organizations. We recommend that this work continue during 2026.

- Continue participating in the Council Coordination Committee (CCC) Habitat Working Group (HWG), Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASFMC) Habitat Committee, and the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership (ACFHP).
- Continue offshore wind-related collaborations and information exchanges at the staff level.
- Continue conversations between NOAA Fisheries and Council staff to discuss emerging issues of concern related to non-fishing activities that may impact EFH and fisheries.
- Continue to share resources and information with NOAA Fisheries, for example with the NEFSC Food Web Dynamics Program that supported the prey species evaluation during our recent EFH Review.

These initiatives can be scaled to match the resources available at both the Council and at partner organizations. Note that the chair role for the CCC HWG will rotate from New England to the North Pacific starting in January 2026.

Science and Research

We recommend the following activities during 2026 to maintain expertise on habitat and ocean planning science and research topics. The first two activities were recommended during the five-year EFH review.

- Conduct periodic literature searches to identify new published research on the habitat impacts from fishing and non-fishing activities and stressors from ocean planning activities, for example. This can be done periodically throughout the year.
- Evaluate progress / opportunities related to list of EFH-related research needs. This can be done periodically throughout the year.
- Review results of specific research projects relevant to Council management areas or topics, for example, research focused on a Council habitat management area or occurring within a Council research area.

Table 3. Potential near-, medium-, and longer-term actions identified during the 5-Year EFH Review (January 2025)

EFH component	Recommended Council Actions	Overall timing from January 2025 approval of EFH Review
1. EFH descriptions and identification for individual species	Evaluate and potentially update EFH text and map components of EFH designations for all NEFMC-managed species. EFH revisions for each species will be prioritized over three years with a roughly equal number of species per year.	Timing: near-term, beginning in 2025 and continuing through 2027.
	Continue to update and advance species / environmental data sources, modeling approaches, and other sources of	Timing: prior to next EFH Review.

EFH component	Recommended Council Actions	Overall timing from January 2025 approval of EFH Review
	information to ensure EFH designation updates utilize the best available information and practices. Continue to collaborate and share habitat-related information / resources with regional and federal partners where appropriate.	
2. Fishing activities that may adversely affect EFH	Update Fishing Effects analysis more routinely (timing dependent on available resources).	Timing: planning near term, implement more regular updates between now and next EFH Review.
	Continue to advance modeling methods. Specifically, continue collaborating with the NPFMC as Fishing Effects modeling work progresses across regions (additional / updated data, literature, adjustments to vulnerability assessment, model calculations, sediment data, energy data, etc.).	Timing: near term and until next EFH Review.
3. Non-Magnuson-Stevens Act fishing activities that may adversely affect EFH	Continue deploying the questionnaire-based review approach, in partnership with the states. Consider refining the questionnaire to ensure that all state fisheries of interest to the Council in the context of EFH impacts are captured in the responses.	Timing: during next EFH Review.
	Include other types of non-MSA fishing that may impact habitat in future reviews, as appropriate. This could include fishing that occurs on federal lands (e.g., those managed by USFWS) or outside MSA jurisdiction such as U.S. high seas permitted fisheries under the High Sea Fishing Compliance Act (1994), recreational, subsistence, and traditional indigenous fishing that doesn't meet the definition of commercial or recreational fishing under MSA.	Timing: during next EFH Review.
4. Non-fishing activities that may adversely affect EFH	Schedule routine check-ins between NOAA Fisheries and Council staff to discuss emerging issues of concern.	Timing: near term.
	Conduct periodic literature searches to identify new published research on the habitat impacts from activities and stressors.	Timing: near term.
	Continue to participate in regional habitat management, science, and conservation partnerships.	Timing: near term.
	Consider the development of new joint Council habitat policies such as marine carbon dioxide removal and offshore sand mining, or other emerging topics as appropriate, as more work and research are done.	Timing: medium term / next few years.
5. Cumulative Impacts	Develop spatial products/maps that show the overlaps between species-specific EFH designations and other marine activities to help inform discussions about impacts to EFH as these activities change/advance.	Timing: prior to next EFH Review.
	Consider developing quantitative indices/metrics to measure cumulative impacts and their changes over time.	Timing: prior to next EFH Review.

EFH component	Recommended Council Actions	Overall timing from January 2025 approval of EFH Review
	Identify and implement improvements to information resources in the cumulative effects analysis sections of FMP documents.	Timing: prior to next EFH Review.
	Consider the strategic offshore wind compensation program that is under development in the U.K. as a potential application in the cumulative effects context.	Timing: prior to next EFH Review.
6. EFH Conservation and Enhancement Recommendations	Consider the need to initiate an action or actions to adjust measures in Council FMPs that minimize the effects of fishing on EFH (e.g., spatial measures). OHA2 recommended this occur on a 10-year time frame from 2018 implementation.	Timing: 2027-2028.
	Consider a more detailed evaluation of Fishing Effects results at finer temporal (monthly) and spatial (sub-regions, management areas) scales to support an evaluation of the Councils' adverse effects minimization measures.	Timing: prior to and during the next EFH Review.
	Consider other factors that could be affecting the offshore marine environment and how these activities may be affecting the prosecution of fisheries in space and time (i.e., offshore wind energy, any new sanctuary designations, etc.). These changes could result in alterations in fishing effort/behavior and could warrant changes in management measures currently in place.	Timing: prior to and during the next EFH Review.
7. Prey species list and any locations	Consider how food habits information of Council-managed species can integrate with and/or inform Council and NOAA processes (e.g., NEFMC's new risk policy, NEFSC bottom trawl survey protocols / design, State of the Ecosystem reports, Socio-Economic Profiles, Fishery Management Plans, NEFMC Climate and Ecosystem Steering Committee, MAFMC Ecosystem and Ocean Planning Committee, etc.).	Timing: near term, during IRA performance period 2025-2027.
	Consider roll-out of products (reports, R-Shiny applications) and ensure proper documentation of methods including R-Shiny application development in repositories such as GitHub.	Timing: near term.
	Continue to share resources and information with NOAA Fisheries (NEFSC Food Web Dynamics Program).	Timing: near term.
8. HAPC	No recommended Council action at this time.	N/A
9. Research and information needs	Consider updating research needs and new and existing inventories of research projects as NEFMC and MAFMC Inflation Reduction Act projects progress.	Timing: During IRA performance period, 2025-2027.