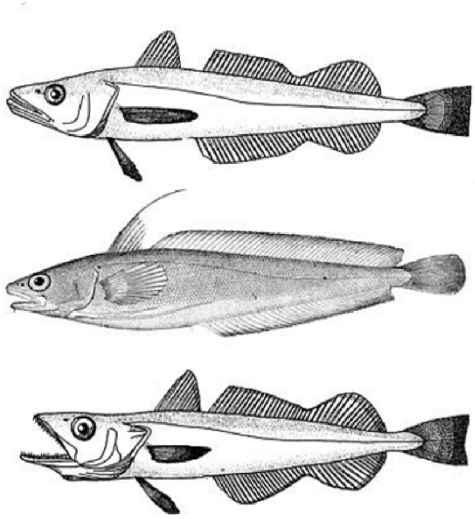
DECISION DOCUMENT

for

2027-2031 Specifications

Small-Mesh Multispecies

Fishery Management Plan



This document was developed to help the Council select a final proposed action.

For November 19, 2026, Joint Committee and Advisory Panel Meeting
November 12, 2026, Committee Version

Prior to selecting final preferred alternatives, the Council will receive a presentation on measures under consideration, analysis completed by the Small-Mesh Multispecies Plan Development Team, and draft impacts as available. The following are anticipated Council actions:

1. Select the *preferred alternatives* for the 2027-2031 Small-Mesh Multispecies Specifications Action.
2. Motion to submit the 2027-2031 Small-Mesh Multispecies Specifications Action to NOAA Fisheries.

Action 1 – 2027-2031 Specifications

Action 1 – 2027-2031 Specifications		Preferred by	
		AP	Committee
Alternative 1	**No Action** Maintain status quo, catch specifications from FY 2024-2026.		
Alternative 2	**Updated FY 2027-2031 Specifications** Updated annual catch specifications for small-mesh multispecies for FY 2027-2031, including the OFL, ABC, ACL, TAL, and TAL trigger.		
Decisions/Questions/Information to Consider			
• See Document 2b, Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) Report from October 28, 2026, with OFL and ABC recommendations for the small-mesh multispecies stocks.			
Other Important Considerations			
• Alternative 2 includes OFL and ABC values as recommended by the SSC based on the 2026 data updates for the four small-mesh stocks and the Council's new risk policy. • The southern red hake TAL trigger alternatives are considered under Action 4.			

Action 2 – Northern Red Hake Possession Limits

Action 2 – Northern Red Hake Possession Limits		Preferred by	
		AP	Committee
Alternative 1	**No Action** Maintain the 3,000-lb possession limit for Northern red hake.		
Alternative 2	**Reset Northern red hake possession limit** The Northern red hake possession limit would be raised to 5,000 lb.		
Decisions/Questions/Information to Consider			
• See Document 4a for analysis of fishery impacts for possession limit alternatives.			
Other Important Considerations			
• The 3,000-lb Northern red hake possession limit was implemented in 2015, when stock biomass was lower and overfishing was occurring. Currently, the northern red hake stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. • The measure was expected to discourage targeting northern red hake, and to incentivize vessels to fish in areas or seasons that would avoid red hake while on silver hake trips. At the time, Advisors recommended a 3,000-lb possession limit to prevent excessive landings of fish, sometimes of lesser quality, which could depress an already low price. • Red hake landings are expected to increase by 9.3% and discards are expected to decrease by 1.2%. affecting 37 of 2,461 trips having red hake landings during 2022-2025. • The lower possession limit also slows catch earlier in the fishing year, which can help delay reaching the TAL trigger for in-season accountability measures (possession limit decrease to 400 lb). • Alternative 2 may increase landings and revenue while decreasing discards, but is not anticipated to increase targeting of red hake or substantially change fishing effort. • The northern red hake stock biomass has increased, but landings and price have declined. Utilization averaged 4.6% of the TAL during FY 2023-2025.			

Action 3 – Southern Red Hake Possession Limits

Action 3 – Southern Red Hake Possession Limits		Preferred by	
		AP	Committee
Alternative 1	**No Action** Maintain Southern red hake possession limits for non-selective small-mesh trawls.		
Alternative 2	**Increase Southern red hake possession limit** The Southern red hake possession limit for non-selective small-mesh trawls would increase from 600 to 1,000 lb.		
Decisions/Questions/Information to Consider			
• Approved selective small-mesh trawls[1], large-mesh trawls, and gears other than trawls already have a 1,000-lb possession limit for southern red hake. • See Document 4a for analysis of fishery impacts for possession limit alternatives.			
Other Important Considerations			
• The Council reduced the small-mesh multispecies fishery possession limit of red hake from 5,000 lb to 600 lb in Framework 62 as part of a biomass rebuilding strategy. • The intention of Alternative 2 is to make regulations more consistent (and thus more easily enforced and improving compliance) while reducing unavoidable discards. A minor increase of 400 lb is unlikely to cause changes in fishing behavior or effort, due in part to low price. • Red hake landings are expected to increase by 19.2% and discards are expected to decrease by 3.4%. affecting 738 of 13,785 trips having red hake landings during 2022-2025. • Since Framework 62, no selective gears using small-mesh trawls have been approved to our knowledge. It is unknown to what extent, if any, that the fishing industry have modified nets to reduce red hake catch or change the selectivity characteristics for other species.			

[1] Approved small-mesh selective gear: raised-footrope trawls, large-mesh belly panel trawls, and rope separator trawls (50 CFR 648.86(e)(1)(v)(B)(2)).

Action 4 – Southern Red Hake TAL Trigger

Action 4 – Southern Red Hake TAL Trigger		Preferred by	
		AP	Committee
Alternative 1	**No Action** Maintain Southern red hake TAL trigger of 40.4%.		
Alternative 2	**Set TAL trigger at 65%** Increase the Southern red hake TAL trigger from 40.4% to 65%.		
Alternative 3	**Set TAL trigger to 65% TAL with stepwise increase to 85% if ACL does not exceed threshold** Set the Southern red hake TAL trigger at 65% for FY 2027-2031, then increase the TAL trigger by 5% annually until it reaches 80% of TAL. The 5% increase would only occur if the fishery does not exceed ???% of ACL in the prior fishing year.		
Alternative 4	**Reset the TAL trigger to 90%** Set the Southern red hake TAL trigger at the original 90% of the TAL, the same as the level applied to the other small-mesh multispecies stocks.		

Decisions/Questions/Information to Consider

- See Document 4b for analysis of southern red hake TAL trigger alternatives.

Other Important Considerations

- The TAL trigger is a monitoring mechanism that accounts for risk of overfishing and is intended to slow the rate of catch for the remainder of the year. Thus, there is a risk consideration. If the TAL trigger is too high, there is an elevated risk that overfishing (i.e. exceeding the ABC) may occur. If it is too low, it may unnecessarily restrict the fishery and reduce landings and revenue while increasing discards.
- To account for overages in the prior fishing year, the TAL trigger was reduced according to the FMP as a post-season accountability measure (AM). The original TAL trigger was set at 90%, but was reduced in two years to account for overages.
- The TAL trigger was met in 2018 and 2020, invoking a reduced 400-lb possession limit for the remainder of the fishing year.
- Since 2021, the TAL trigger has been met, but the in-season AM to reduce the possession limit to 400 lb was not invoked because projections indicated that the landings would not exceed the TAL by the end of the year. Quota utilization was 67.1%, 77.6%, and 65.6% in fishing years 2023-2025, respectively.
- A low TAL trigger provides a check on landings when the fishery catch rate is high and/or the TAL or quota is low. In the opposite circumstance, a low TAL trigger may unduly restrict landings and increase discards.
- After reviewing the analysis, the PDT developed Alternative 3 as a graduated way to assess risk and make adjustments through routine annual notice action. An exception to postpone the trigger increase was not defined and a graduated approach was not analyzed. We could provide some additional qualitative analysis in the submission document.

Action 5 – Monkfish Possession Limit in the Cultivator Shoal Exemption Area

Action 5 – Monkfish Possession Limit in the Cultivator Shoal Exemption Area		Preferred by	
		AP	Committee
Alternative 1	**No Action** Current monkfish possession limits specified for the Cultivator Shoal Whiting Fishery Exemption Area would remain in effect. The current monkfish possession limit in the Cultivator Shoal Exemption Area is the lesser of 10%, by weight, of all other species on board OR up to 50 lb (23 kg) tail-weight/146 lb (66 kg) whole-weight of monkfish per trip (50 CFR 648.80(a)(6)(i)(B)).		
Alternative 2	**Revise the monkfish possession limit in the Cultivator Shoal Whiting Fishery Exemption Area** Revise the monkfish possession limit in the Cultivator Shoal Whiting Fishery Exemption Area to make it consistent with the monkfish possession limits for vessels fishing with small mesh and not fishing under a day-at-sea (DAS), as specified in the Monkfish FMP. The monkfish FMP possession limit for vessels using small mesh while not on a monkfish, multispecies, or scallop DAS is 50 lb (23 kg) tail weight or 146 lb (66 kg) whole weight of monkfish per day or partial day, up to a maximum of 150 lb (68 kg) tail weight or 437 lb (198 kg) whole weight per trip (50 CFR 648.94(c)(4)).		

Decisions/Questions/Information to Consider

- See Document 4a for analysis of fishery impacts for possession limit alternatives.
- The intent of this more restrictive possession limit was to prevent vessels from using small-mesh trawls to target or potentially target monkfish in the early years of the monkfish fishery when prices were high.
- Adopting Alternative 2, the monkfish FMP's possession limits for vessels fishing with small mesh and not fishing under a day-at-sea, would:
    - remove the additional constraint limiting monkfish possession to 10 percent, by weight, of all other species on board; and
    - replace the per trip possession limit of 50 lb (23 kg) tail-weight/146 lb (66 kg) whole-weight of monkfish with *the possession limits in the Monkfish FMP that apply to non-target gears.*
- Alternative 2 would remove the need to assess whether retained monkfish exceeded 10% of the total weight of fish onboard, which can only be determined at the dock.
    - This would ease law enforcement monitoring requirements and could improve compliance.
    - Making bycatch regulations in exempted fisheries more consistent with possession regulations in the monkfish FMP and for other fisheries may also reduce the need for a Letter of Authorization.
- Alternative 2 may increase landings and revenue while decreasing discards, but is not anticipated to increase targeting of monkfish or substantially change fishing effort (due to trip duration and fishing costs).
- Landings are expected to increase by 32.5% and discards are expected to decrease by 6.8%. affecting 10 of 20 Cultivator Shoals Area trips having monkfish landings during 2022-2025.

Other Important Considerations

- Adopting the Monkfish FMP's possession limit for small mesh vessels is consistent with the intended management and considered biological impacts of the monkfish FMP.
- The regulations for the Cultivator Shoal Exemption Area would be simplified by removing the current monkfish possession limit text and instead pointing to the existing monkfish regulations on possession limits for vessels fishing with small mesh and not fishing under a DAS specified in the Monkfish FMP.

Action 6 – Lobster Possession Limit in the Cultivator Shoal Exemption Area

Action 6 – Lobster Possession Limit in the Cultivator Shoal Exemption Area		Preferred by	
		AP	Committee
Alternative 1	**No Action** Current lobster possession limits specified for the Cultivator Shoal Whiting Fishery Exemption Area would remain in effect. The current lobster possession limits specified for the Cultivator Shoal Whiting Fishery Exemption Area are the lesser or 10%, by weight, of all other species on board, or 200 lobsters, unless otherwise restricted by landing limits specified in the lobster FMP (50 CFR 648.80(a)(6)(i)(B)) The lobster regulations at § 697.17(a) further limit possession to 100 lobsters (or parts thereof), for each lobster day-at-sea[2] or part of a lobster day-at-sea.		
Alternative 2	**Revise the American lobster possession limit in the Cultivator Shoal Whiting Fishery Exemption Area** Revise the American lobster possession limit in the Cultivator Shoal Whiting Fishery Exemption Area to make it consistent with the lobster possession limits for vessels fishing with any non-trap gear as specified in the American Lobster Interstate FMP. This change would set the lobster possession limit for Cultivator Shoals Area trips to 500 lobsters (or parts thereof) per trip, while retaining the limit of 100 lobsters (or parts thereof) for each full or partial day-at-sea[1].		
Decisions/Questions/Information to Consider			
• See Document 4a for analysis of fishery impacts for possession limit alternatives. • The intent of this more restrictive possession limit was to prevent vessels from using small-mesh trawls to target lobster. • Alternative 2 would make the regulations in the Cultivator Shoal Exemption Area consistent with other vessels fishing with any non-trap gear, which are also discouraged from targeting lobster with trawl gears. • Lobster landings and revenue may be lower than the maximum possession limit under Alternative 2, which is also based on trip duration. • The revised lobster possession limit may increase landings and revenue while decreasing discards, but is not anticipated to increase targeting of lobster or substantially change fishing effort (due to trip duration and fishing costs). • Landings and discards are expected to change less than 0.1%, affecting only 1 of 33 Cultivator Shoals Area trips having lobster landings during 2022-2025.			
Other Important Considerations			
• Adopting the lobster FMP's possession limit for small mesh vessels is consistent with the intended management and considered biological impacts of the lobster FMP. • Only trips longer than 2 days in length could possess more than 200 lobsters. The average trip duration for trips in the Cultivator Shoal Exemption Area is 1.90 days. • The regulations for the Cultivator Shoal Exemption Area would be simplified by removing the current lobster possession limit text and instead pointing to the existing lobster regulations on possession limits for vessels fishing with fishing with any non-trap gear.			

[2] Lobster day-at-sea: with respect to the American lobster fishery means each 24-hour period of time during which a fishing vessel is absent from port in which the vessel intends to fish for, possess, or land, or fishes for, possesses, or lands American lobster (50 CFR 697.2(a) "Lobster day-at-sea").