

# Exemption Area Topics



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# Exemption Area Topics: Research and Management History



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# Boundaries and Seasons

## Exploration of SMS to GFLM catches

- Prior research
  - Initial experimental fisheries – 1990s
  - MA DMF experimental fishery
    - Data from small-mesh area I
    - 2 years
    - Changes in SMS to groundfish catch ratios were insignificant
  - PDT analysis of raised footrope trawl was inconclusive
    - No valid comparison in the same areas and seasons



# Recent Exemption Area Research

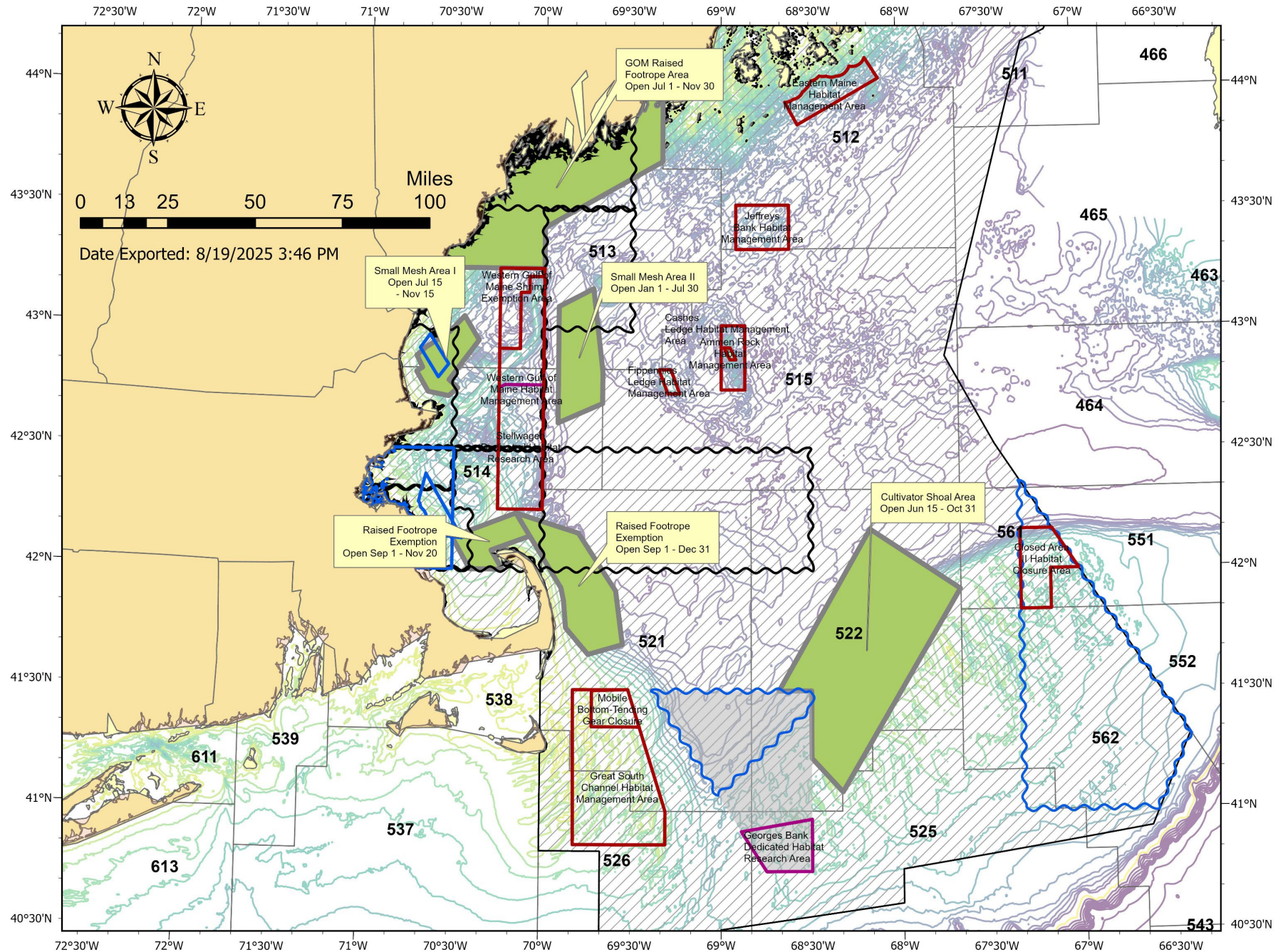
- 2016-2017: MA DMF conducted an experimental fishery in Small-Mesh Area 1, Raised Footrope Trawl Exemption Area (western portion)
  - Wanted to explore opening exemption areas earlier
- Main discards were haddock, lobster, plaice, spiny dogfish; accumulated to slightly more than 5% of kept catch (lots of haddock at the time)
- No strong recommendations for spatial/temporal changes in exemption areas



# Prior AP/Committee Discussion re: Exemption Areas

- November 2023 AP/Cte meeting:
  - Some discussion around changing exemption area seasons/boundaries; forwarded a recommendation to the Council, but was not included in IRA project proposal
- November 2025 AP/Cte meeting:
  - Suggestion to reexamine Small Mesh Area 2 and Cultivator Shoals Area (alignment with new habitat and groundfish management areas, adjusting dates of opening)





Exemption Area		Gulf of Maine Grate Raised Footrope Trawl	Cultivator Shoal	Small Mesh Area 1	Small Mesh Area 2	Raised Footrope Trawl Areas (Cape Cod)	Southern New England	Mid-Atlantic
<b>Season</b>		July 1-Nov 30	June 15-Oct 31	July 15-Nov 15	Jan 1 – June 30	Sept 1- Nov 20/Dec 31 (eastern portion)	Year round	Year round
<b>Gear Requirements</b>	<b>Mesh size</b>	Minimum 2.5” square or diamond	Minimum 3” square or diamond			Minimum 2.5” square or diamond	Can only land small-mesh species with trawl gear; minimum 6” diamond or 6.5” square mesh (vessels fishing under NE mult DAS or sector trip).	Trawl: may use <6.5” mesh if participating in exempted fishery
	<b>Other</b>	Raised footrope trawl with excluder grate; no sweep	N/A	Raised footrope trawl		Raised footrope trawl		Gillnet exempted fishery: only gillnet gear, minimum 5” mesh. Limited to 50 gillnets
<b>Possession Limit</b>	<b>Red Hake</b>	Northern: 3,000 lb	Northern: 3,000 lb	Northern: 3,000 lb		Northern: 3,000 lb	Southern: <5.5” mesh: 600 lb ≥5.5” mesh using small-mesh selective trawls: 1,000 lb	Southern: <5.5” mesh: 600 lb ≥5.5” mesh using small-mesh selective trawls: 1,000 lb
	<b>Whiting (Silver/Offshore Hake)</b>	7,500 lb	30,000 lb	<3” mesh: 15,000 lb ≥3” mesh: 30,000 lb		<3” mesh: 15,000 lb ≥3” mesh: 30,000 lb	<3” mesh: 15,000 lb ≥3” mesh: 40,000 lb	<3” mesh: 15,000 lb ≥3” mesh: 40,000 lb
<b>Incidental Species allowed</b>		Atlantic herring; Atlantic mackerel; Alewife; Butterfish; Squid	Atlantic herring; Atlantic mackerel; Butterfish; Squid; Longhorn sculpin; Spiny dogfish; Monkfish & monkfish parts; American lobster	Atlantic herring; Atlantic mackerel; Butterfish; Squid; Scup; Spiny dogfish		Atlantic herring; Atlantic mackerel; Butterfish; Squid; Scup; Spiny dogfish	Atlantic herring; Atlantic mackerel; Butterfish; Squid; Scup; Spiny dogfish	
<b>LOA Required?</b>		No	Yes	No		Yes	No	No <sup>7</sup>
<b>NOAA Fisheries: <a href="https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/silver-hake/exempted-fishing">https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/silver-hake/exempted-fishing</a>; Regulations: <a href="https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-50/section-648.80">https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-50/section-648.80</a></b>								

**1991**

Cultivator Shoal,  
Southern New  
England  
exemption areas  
open

**1995**

Small Mesh  
Areas 1 & 2  
open

**1996**

Mid-Atlantic  
Exemption Area  
redefined

**2000**

Raised Footrope  
Trawl (Cape  
Cod) Area  
opened

**2003**

Inshore Gulf of  
Maine Raised  
Footrope Trawl  
Area opened



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# Exemption Area Topics: **Letters of Authorization**



# Letters of Authorization (LOAs) for Small-Mesh Exemption Areas

- Outline the terms and conditions for fishing in a particular exemption area: area, season, gear type, possession limits, bycatch limits
- LOAs required for Cultivator Shoal and Raised Footrope Trawl exemption areas; formerly required for SNE/Small Mesh 1 & 2/ Mid-Atlantic (requirement removed in 2000)

Fishing Year	Cultivator Shoal			Raised Footrope Trawl		
	# Permits	# Active Permits	# Trips	# Permits	# Active Permits	# Trips
2020	6	C	C	7	C	C
2021	4	4	68	5	4	43
2022	11	5	79	6	3	41
2023	9	5	51	8	5	39
2024	10	5	29	7	C	C
2025	3	C	C	5	C	C

Source: NOAA/GARFO. Retrieved 2/18/2026 by K. Winiarski  
Confidential data is indicated by a "C".



# LOA Uses

- **Enforcement:** used during enforcement operations to determine compliance with regulations; provide clarity for vessel operators
- **Observer Coverage:** Not used to assign observer coverage
- **Management:** One initial objective of LOAs was to allow NMFS to identify vessels participating in the fishery → simplified monitoring; some data analysis applications



# Discussion Questions

- How do you use the LOA(s) issued to your vessel? Are there any ways to make the LOA more functional and/or informative?
- Did you experience any challenges requesting an LOA in fall 2025 during the government shutdown? Could this have impacted slightly lower participation in the Cultivator Shoal and Raised Footrope Trawl area fisheries, or are there other contributing factors?
- Are there any other LOA uses or related topics to explore further in this memo?



# Exemption Area Topics: **Bycatch allowances**



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# Bycatch Limits

- ***Small Mesh (<5.5 in) Prohibited*** by initial FMP (1985) to prevent bycatch of regulated species.
- ***Exemption Program Established*** that allows RA to exempt a fishery from minimum mesh size if bycatch of groundfish is less than 5%.
- ***Several whiting fishery exemptions*** have been approved in Gulf of Maine, Southern New England, and the Mid-Atlantic.
- ***Allowed bycatch species and limits*** vary between programs.
  - The GOM Grate Raised Footrope is the most restrictive.
  - The SNE exemption area allows possession of the most species.
  - Mid-Atlantic exemption area does not have bycatch limits.



# Bycatch Limits

Species	GOM Grate Raised Footrope Trawl	Cultivator Shoal	Small Mesh Areas 1 & 2	Raised Footrope Trawl (Cape Cod)	SNE*
Atlantic herring	X	X	X	X	X
Atlantic mackerel	X	X	X	X	X
Alewife	X				X
Butterfish	X	X	X	X	X
Loligo squid	X	X	X	X	X
Illex squid	X	X	X	X	X
Scup	X		X	X	X
Longhorn sculpin		X			X
Spiny dogfish		X	X	X	X
Monkfish		X			X
American lobster		X			X



# Bycatch Limits

***\*The SNE Exemption Area also allows small-mesh vessels to possess the following additional species:***

Swordfish	American shad	Bluefish	Shrimp	Blowfish
Spot	Hickory shad	Skate	Summer flounder	Tautog
Atlantic croaker	Alewife	Mullet	Weakfish	Cunner
Sea ravens	Four spot flounder	John Dory	Conger eel	Atlantic chub mackerel
Blueback herring	Tilefish	Ocean pout	Black sea bass	Sea robin



# Bycatch Limits

- ***Cultivator Shoal***: Created by A4 with 1% bycatch limit of regulated species based on experimental fishery data. Revised by A5, FW3, FW6, and FW9.
- ***Small Mesh Areas I and II***: Created by FW 9 exemption supplement.
- ***Raised Footrope Trawl***: Created by FW35. FW35 also prohibited possession of bottom-dwelling species, such as lobster and monkfish, to discourage vessels from rigging their gear improperly. Also applied to Small Mesh Areas I and II.
- ***FW37***: Limited all GOM raised footrope trawl areas to possession of: Red hake, squid, butterfish, mackerel, dogfish, herring, and scup.



# Bycatch Limits

- ***GOM Grate Raised Footrope***: Created by FW38.
- Incidental catch set the same as for the Cape Cod Bay raised footrope trawl, with one exception that possession of dogfish was prohibited.
- FW38 prohibited the possession of monkfish, lobsters, and skates to ensure that the net is rigged correctly, such that the footrope is not in contact with the bottom, and thus much less likely to catch those species.
- Possession of crabs, longhorn sculpin, sea raven, and dogfish was prohibited to reduce damage to whiting and to encourage fishing the net with the footrope off the bottom.



# Exemption Area Topics: **Boundaries and Seasons**



# Boundaries and Seasons

## Exploration of SMS to GFLM catches

- PDT has begun exploring catch and survey data by ten-minute square
- CAMS data (2018-2025) showed little indication of elevated SMS catches outside the EA boundaries. Data may be insufficiently granular.
  - Average catch ratio for trip reported as one lat/lon pair on a trip
- Survey data insufficiently granular over time
- Observed haul data (2021-2025)



# Boundaries and Seasons

## Exploration of SMS to GFLM catches

- Observed haul data (2021-2025) – more promising.
  - Hotspots for trips using large mesh can be identified in time and space
  - Are there months and places where the SMS catch is relatively high, compared with large-mesh groundfish catch?
- Considerations
  - Threshold? Minimum number of observed hauls/trips?
  - Consistency? Catch variation?
  - Selectivity? Different threshold for large vs. small mesh?

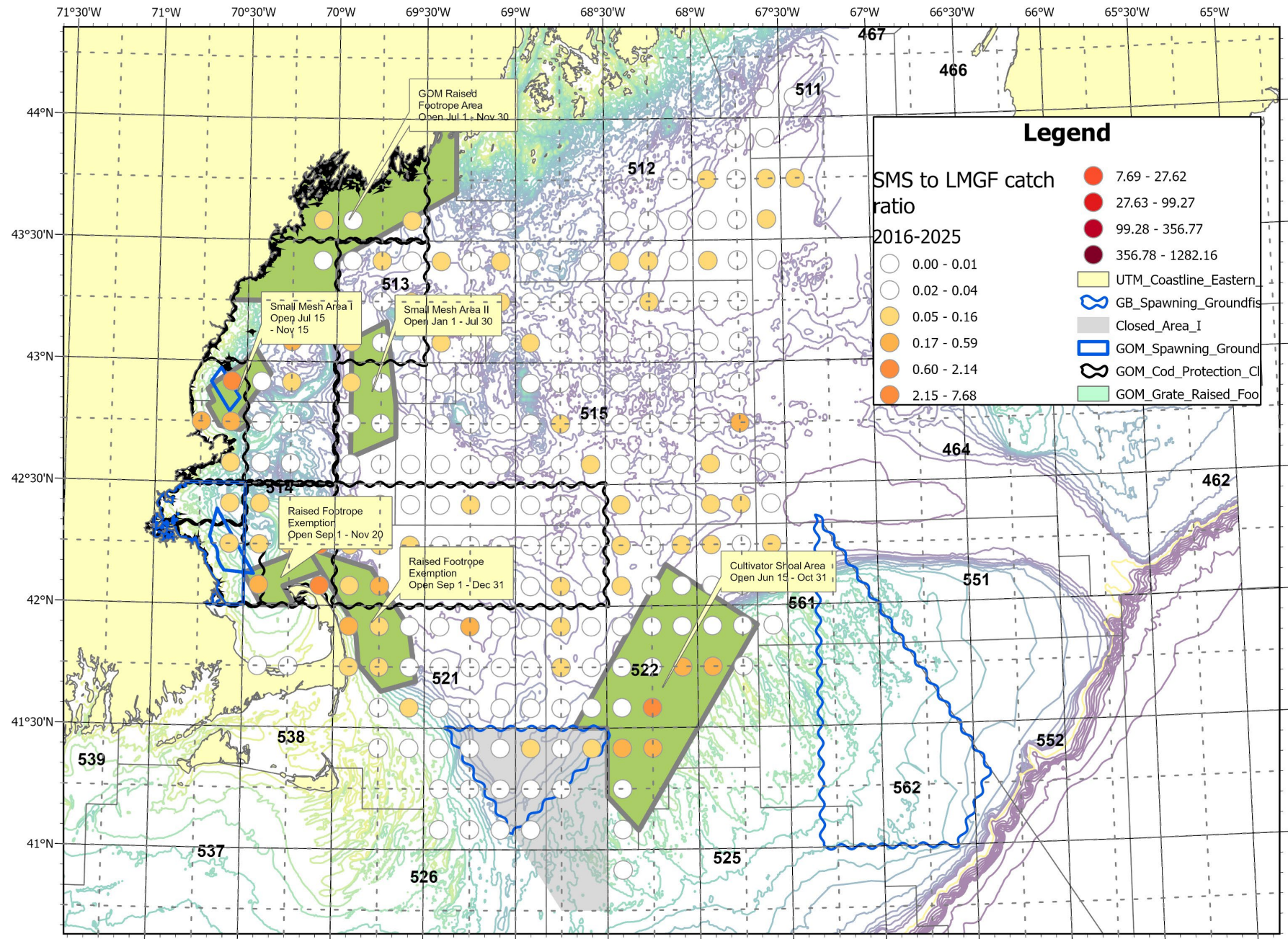


Small-mesh multispecies to  
groundfish catch ratios  
by vessels using large mesh  
trawls on observed trips

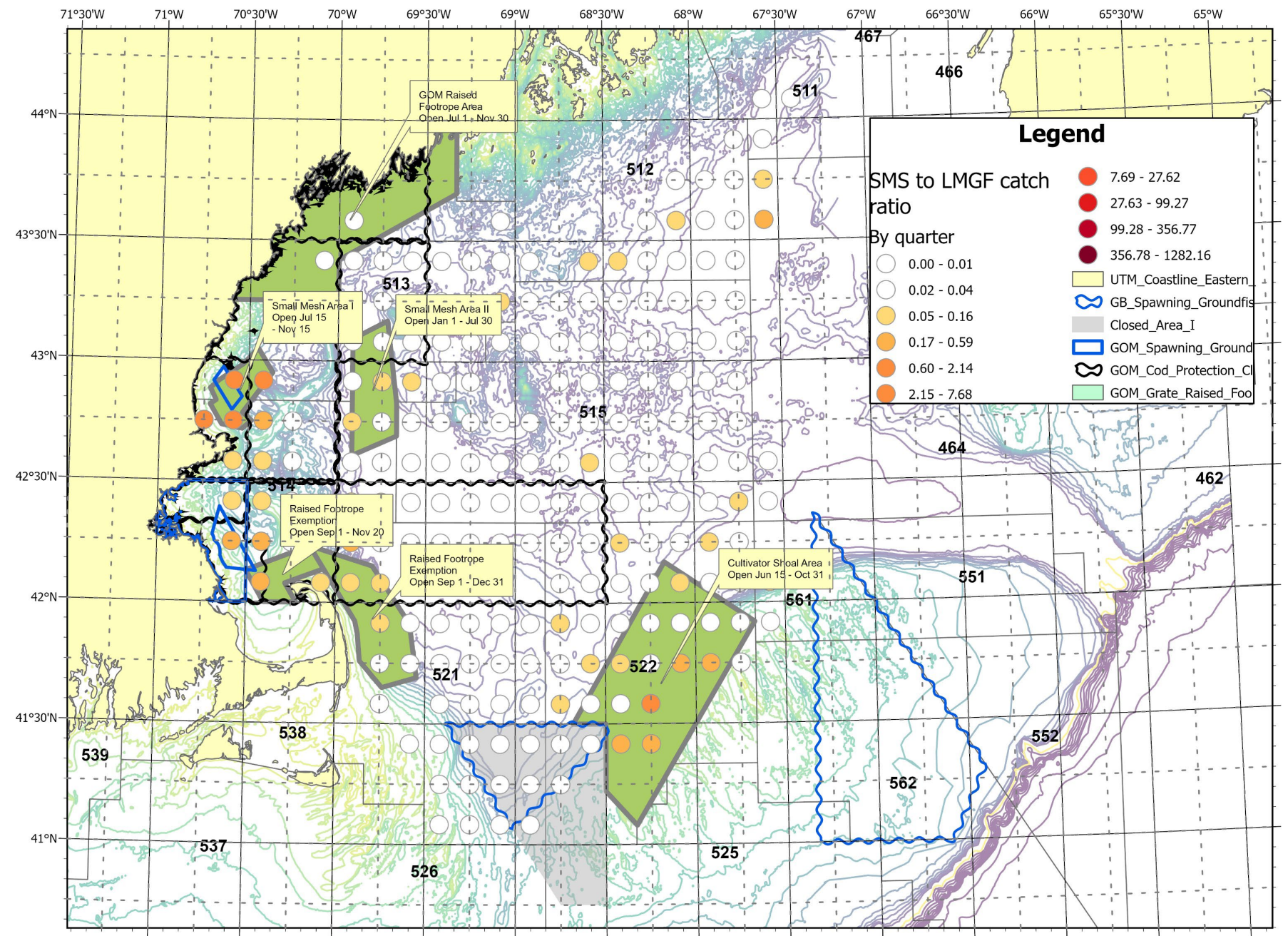
Ten-minute square analysis



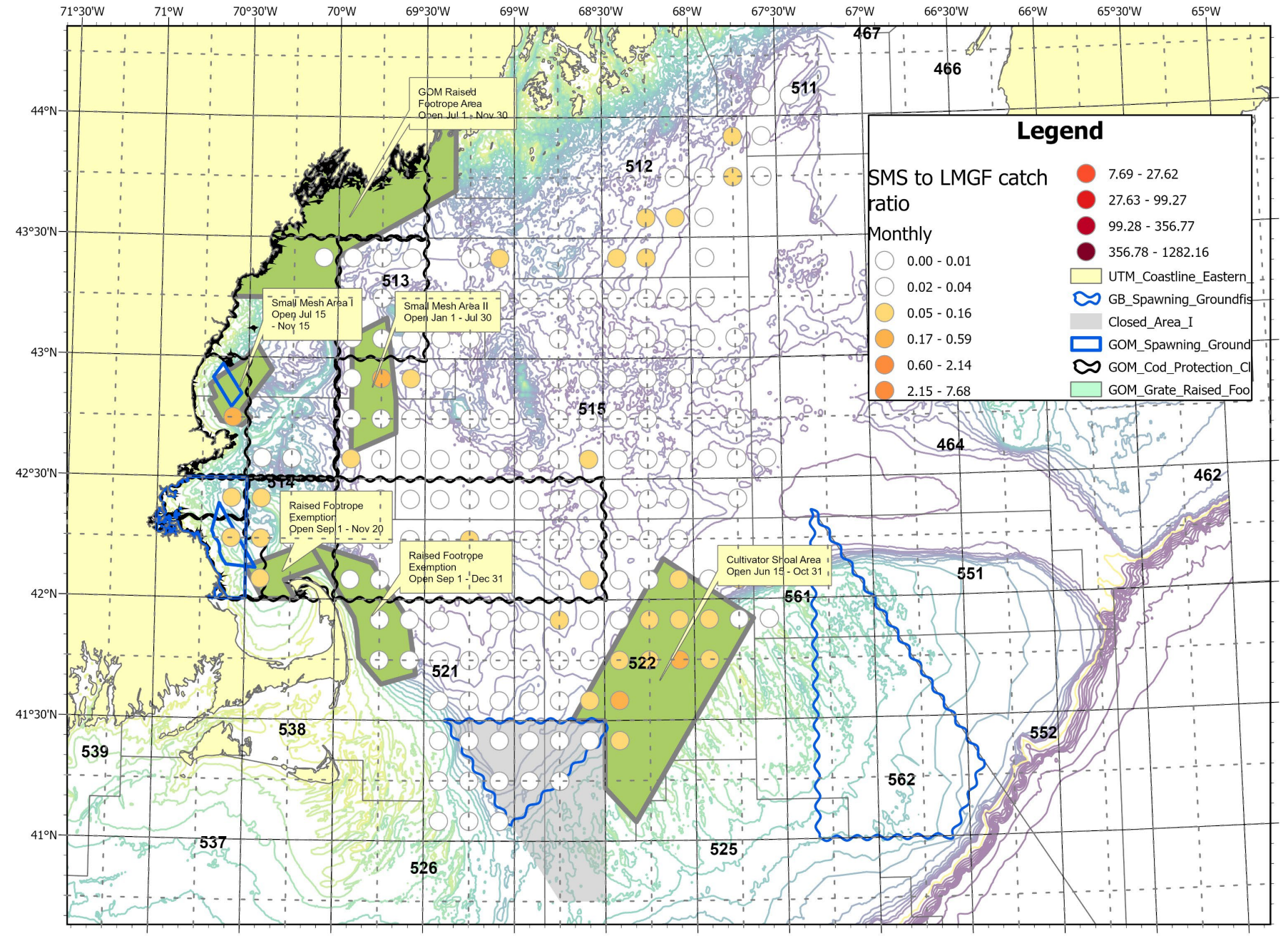
Small-mesh multispecies to large-mesh groundfish catch, 2016-2025 by large mesh trawls on observed trips



Quarter 3:  
 Small-mesh  
 multispecies to  
 large-mesh  
 groundfish catch,  
 2016-2025  
 by large mesh  
 trawls on  
 observed trips



September:  
 Small-mesh  
 multispecies to  
 large-mesh  
 groundfish catch,  
 2016-2025  
 by large mesh  
 trawls on  
 observed trips



# Cultivator Shoals Area

AREA 522  
 MESH\_GROUP > 5.5 in

Row Labels	Vessels.	Observed trips	Observed hauls	Ave SMS to GF catch ratio
<b>CSA-near</b>	<b>1827</b>	<b>2273</b>	<b>5206</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>42.083</b>				
-68.583	88	105	234	3%
-68.417	52	57	131	2%
-68.25	71	77	220	4%
-68.083	69	77	143	7%
-67.917	94	118	291	4%
-67.75	142	170	339	13%
<b>41.917</b>				
-68.583	68	81	155	3%
-68.417	156	188	416	5%
-68.25	132	155	314	5%
-68.083	94	117	194	23%
-67.917	119	157	395	15%
-67.75	49	55	124	5%
<b>41.75</b>				
-68.583	181	245	637	6%
-68.417	171	222	527	11%
-68.25	61	67	96	17%
-68.083	18	21	30	82%
-67.917	33	49	129	13%
-67.75	8	11	36	2%
<b>41.583</b>				
-68.583	112	145	327	6%
-68.417	64	100	333	26%
-68.25	4	5	5	118%
<b>41.417</b>				
-68.583	13	16	40	11%
-68.417	23	30	83	131%
-68.25	5	5	7	45%

More distant	1144	1284	2375	4%
<b>42.417</b>				
-68.917	5	5	5	3%
-68.75	22	24	32	1%
-68.583	3	3	3	8%
-68.417	11	11	17	5%
-68.25	17	18	24	3%
-68.083	10	10	11	2%
-67.917	8	8	10	11%
-67.75	6	6	6	10%
<b>42.25</b>				
-68.917	50	54	65	2%
-68.75	148	171	368	1%
-68.583	98	110	225	2%
-68.417	51	55	74	3%
-68.25	83	86	167	2%
-68.083	97	109	241	8%
-67.917	69	82	191	10%
-67.75	54	61	115	5%
-67.583	32	36	50	2%
<b>42.083</b>				
-68.75	30	34	55	4%
-67.583	64	73	109	7%
<b>41.917</b>				
-68.917	10	12	16	2%
-68.75	23	25	48	6%
-67.583	23	29	52	1%
<b>41.75</b>				
-68.917	13	13	16	4%
-68.75	65	72	108	5%
<b>41.583</b>				
-68.917	10	10	11	3%
-68.75	88	109	264	4%
<b>41.417</b>				
-68.917	15	17	20	5%
-68.75	28	30	59	5%
<b>41.25</b>				
-68.917	8	8	10	1%
-68.75	3	3	3	13%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2971</b>	<b>3557</b>	<b>7581</b>	<b>6%</b>

AREA 521  
 MESH\_GROUP > 5.5 in

# Raised Footrope Trawl Areas

Row Labels	Vessels.	Observed trips	Observed hauls	Ave SMS to GF catch ratio
<b>RFA1-near</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>94%</b>
<b>42.083</b>				
-70.083	6	7	7	94%
<b>RFA2-near</b>	<b>1073</b>	<b>1551</b>	<b>3374</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>42.083</b>				
-69.917	143	223	385	9%
-69.75	310	525	1293	10%
-69.583	168	219	447	5%
<b>41.917</b>				
-69.917	25	49	100	49%
-69.75	176	230	486	9%
-69.583	136	169	373	4%
<b>41.75</b>				
-69.917	12	19	29	12%
-69.75	19	23	43	9%
-69.583	84	94	218	4%
<b>More distant</b>	<b>2951</b>	<b>3517</b>	<b>7106</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>42.417</b>				
-69.917	108	125	155	8%
-69.75	30	31	32	6%
-69.583	34	35	41	4%
-69.417	16	16	16	4%
-69.25	15	17	21	8%
-69.083	6	6	7	1%
-68.917	5	5	5	3%
<b>42.25</b>				
-69.917	304	420	856	6%
-69.75	255	356	669	8%
-69.583	137	178	316	7%
-69.417	158	188	308	2%
-69.25	89	95	136	5%
-69.083	100	127	260	2%
-68.917	100	115	192	1%
-68.75	78	86	127	1%
<b>42.083</b>				
-69.417	106	128	328	3%
-69.25	75	86	158	2%
-69.083	45	53	145	2%
-68.917	6	6	6	2%
-68.75	8	8	8	3%

<b>41.917</b>				
-69.417	34	40	60	2%
-69.25	42	44	63	4%
-69.083	24	27	35	4%
-68.917	43	46	131	4%
-68.75	9	9	11	3%
<b>41.75</b>				
-69.417	65	73	153	3%
-69.25	90	102	198	2%
-69.083	48	50	79	3%
-68.917	43	46	97	2%
-68.75	12	13	14	4%
<b>41.583</b>				
-69.583	3	3	3	19%
-69.417	75	86	280	3%
-69.25	141	157	364	3%
-69.083	72	82	163	2%
-68.917	31	32	43	3%
-68.75	13	14	19	5%
<b>41.417</b>				
-69.417	36	39	128	2%
-69.25	103	117	247	4%
-69.083	135	154	459	3%
-68.917	72	87	210	4%
-68.75	12	13	16	2%
<b>41.25</b>				
-69.417	17	20	108	0%
-69.25	19	20	39	3%
-69.083	80	97	232	4%
-68.917	50	58	157	4%
<b>41.083</b>				
-69.25	7	7	11	0%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>4030</b>	<b>5075</b>	<b>10487</b>	<b>5%</b>

# Small Mesh Area I

AREA	514			
MESH_GROUP	> 5.5 in			
Row Labels	Vessels.	Observed trips	Observed hauls	Ave SMS to GF catch ratio
<b>RFA1-near</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30%</b>
<b>42.083</b>				
-70.083	13	16	30	30%
<b>RFA2-near</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>48%</b>
<b>42.083</b>				
-69.917	10	10	10	48%
<b>SMA1-near</b>	<b>1046</b>	<b>2888</b>	<b>5381</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>42.917</b>				
-70.583	8	8	8	8%
-70.417	15	17	17	1%
<b>42.75</b>				
-70.583	112	247	509	3%
-70.417	114	191	325	2%
<b>42.583</b>				
-70.583	15	23	30	9%
-70.417	184	438	667	4%
<b>42.417</b>				
-70.583	156	468	883	11%
-70.417	229	677	1279	9%
<b>42.25</b>				
-70.583	111	472	985	15%
-70.417	83	315	636	15%
<b>42.083</b>				
-70.583	5	11	14	4%
-70.417	14	21	28	20%

<b>More distant</b>	<b>1657</b>	<b>2177</b>	<b>3834</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>42.917</b>				
-69.917	84	100	121	7%
-69.75	37	41	44	5%
<b>42.75</b>				
-70.75	4	9	12	15%
-70.25	45	62	129	1%
-69.917	181	219	399	4%
-69.75	155	173	265	5%
-69.583	45	48	53	3%
<b>42.583</b>				
-70.25	53	124	221	2%
-69.917	268	353	699	5%
-69.75	104	124	172	5%
-69.583	71	83	106	7%
<b>42.417</b>				
-70.25	16	25	33	4%
-69.917	320	435	1015	4%
-69.75	93	104	138	3%
-69.583	16	17	19	3%
<b>42.25</b>				
-70.25	30	101	223	7%
-70.083	8	10	12	29%
-69.917	83	99	118	7%
-69.75	33	37	38	6%
-69.583	4	4	4	1%
<b>41.917</b>				
-70.25	3	5	6	3%
<b>41.75</b>				
-70.417	4	4	7	1%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2726</b>	<b>5091</b>	<b>9255</b>	<b>6%</b>

# Gulf of Maine Raised Footrope Area

AREA	513			
MESH_GROUP	> 5.5 in			
Row Labels	Vessels.	Observed trips	Observed hauls	Ave SMS to GF catch ratio
<b>GOMFA-near</b>	<b>730</b>	<b>992</b>	<b>2088</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>43.583</b>				
-70.083	3	3	3	4%
-69.917	6	7	8	3%
<b>43.417</b>				
-70.083	35	53	126	3%
-69.917	52	75	188	3%
-69.75	54	70	142	5%
-69.583	57	87	211	5%
-69.417	16	18	25	16%
<b>43.25</b>				
-70.25	4	6	19	11%
-70.083	25	35	81	4%
-69.917	258	357	774	3%
-69.75	144	190	325	3%
-69.583	26	34	77	4%
-69.417	50	57	109	6%
<b>SMA1-near</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>341</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>42.917</b>				
-70.583	13	21	34	5%
-70.417	54	85	197	0%
<b>42.75</b>				
-70.583	24	36	38	6%
-70.417	48	64	72	1%

<b>More distant</b>	<b>1876</b>	<b>2312</b>	<b>4513</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>43.583</b>				
-69.083	7	9	20	2%
<b>43.417</b>				
-69.25	16	18	26	3%
-69.083	30	41	92	5%
-68.917	5	5	7	12%
<b>43.25</b>				
-69.25	59	71	117	4%
-69.083	43	50	72	9%
-68.917	6	6	6	10%
<b>43.083</b>				
-70.25	6	7	11	30%
-69.917	293	404	917	5%
-69.75	185	248	593	4%
-69.583	47	53	100	4%
-69.417	91	100	191	6%
-69.25	144	174	388	4%
-69.083	15	15	15	5%
<b>42.917</b>				
-70.25	15	17	37	16%
-69.917	200	270	500	7%
-69.75	221	251	393	5%
-69.583	143	178	475	3%
-69.417	69	85	175	2%
-69.25	11	12	15	2%
<b>42.75</b>				
-69.917	83	94	121	5%
-69.75	70	77	90	4%
-69.583	68	74	86	4%
-69.417	49	53	66	2%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2745</b>	<b>3510</b>	<b>6942</b>	<b>4%</b>

# Central Gulf of Maine

AREA	515			
MESH_GROUP	> 5.5 in			
Row Labels	Vessels.	Observed trips	Observed hauls	Ave SMS to GF catch ratio
More distant	<b>5357</b>	<b>6013</b>	<b>10960</b>	<b>3%</b>
43.417				
-69.083	3	5	6	13%
-68.917	4	5	6	3%
-68.583	6	6	6	4%
-68.417	17	18	22	6%
-68.25	10	11	15	9%
-68.083	5	5	5	2%
-67.917	10	10	10	1%
-67.75	9	9	10	3%
43.25	<b>320</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>645</b>	<b>3%</b>
43.083	<b>479</b>	<b>537</b>	<b>1001</b>	<b>3%</b>
42.917	<b>656</b>	<b>714</b>	<b>1503</b>	<b>2%</b>
42.75	<b>1079</b>	<b>1233</b>	<b>2365</b>	<b>3%</b>
42.583	<b>1602</b>	<b>1829</b>	<b>3413</b>	<b>2%</b>
42.417	<b>989</b>	<b>1107</b>	<b>1746</b>	<b>3%</b>
42.25				
-69.75	11	11	11	4%
-69.583	31	32	36	3%
-69.417	10	10	10	3%
-69.25	7	7	8	5%
-69.083	4	4	6	3%
-68.917	3	3	3	1%
-68.75	38	41	50	1%
-68.583	4	4	4	2%
-68.25	19	19	27	4%
-68.083	25	27	33	3%
-67.917	6	6	8	30%
-67.75	5	5	5	16%
-67.583	5	5	6	11%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>5357</b>	<b>6013</b>	<b>10960</b>	<b>3%</b>