



New England Fishery Management Council

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DRAFT MEETING SUMMARY

Groundfish Advisory Panel Meeting

Webinar

November 17, 2025

The Groundfish Advisory Panel (GAP) met on November 17, 2025, via webinar to discuss: 1) Framework Adjustment (FW) 72/Specifications and Management Measures, and 2) Other business, as necessary.

MEETING ATTENDANCE:

Groundfish Advisory Panel: Hank Soule (Chair), Al Cottone, Gib Brogan, and Bonnie Brady. A quorum was not present.

Absent: Linda Hunt, Lucas Raymond, Cassie Canastra Larsen (Vice-Chair), Ben Martens

Groundfish Committee Chair: John Pappalardo

New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) Staff: Mark Grant, Jamie Cournane, Angelia Miller (Maris Collaborative),

In addition, about 29 other people attended. Among them were:

Jackie Odell, Geoff Smith, Melanie Griffin, Peter Whelan, and Megan Ware (Groundfish Committee/Council members); Frank Blount (Recreational Advisory Panel chair); Mitch MacDonald and Scott Sakowski (NOAA General Counsel); Peter Christopher, Liz Sullivan, Heather Nelson, and Laura Smith (Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO)); Adelle Molina, Paul Nitschke, Glenn Chamberlain (Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC)); Corrin Flora (Maine Department of Marine Resources (ME DMR)); Sefatia Romeo Theken (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game (MA DFG) Deputy Commissioner); Kelly Whitmore (Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries (MA DMF)); Julia Mason (Environmental Defense Fund); Libby Etrie and Gareth Lawson (Conservation Law Foundation); Aubrey Church (Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen's Alliance); Tracey Bauer (Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC)); Mike Waine (American Sportfishing Association); Maggie Raymond; Rick Bellavance; Adam Baske; and one anonymous participant.

The meeting began at approximately 9:02 am.

KEY OUTCOMES

- The GAP lacked a quorum to vote on recommendations to the Groundfish Committee but developed 10 discussion statements.
- The discussion statements included recommending preferred alternatives for Actions 1 (Status Determination Criteria (SDC) for Georges Bank (GB) yellowtail flounder) and 2 (Revised

Specifications) in FW 72 but did not include a recommendation for Action 3 (Recreational Fishery Management).

- The GAP provided discussion statements supporting higher risk tolerance for white hake and Acadian redfish specifications, recommending a new Council priority to revise the white hake rebuilding plan, and recommending evaluation of suspending the redfish exemption program.
- The GAP provided discussion statements supporting the use of fishery dependent data in apportioning stocks in the US/Canada management area.
- The GAP provided discussion statements supporting the Groundfish Plan Development Team's (PDT) recommended sub-components and recommending Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic (SNE/MA) yellowtail flounder sub-ACL for the scallop fishery.

AGENDA ITEM #1: FRAMEWORK 72 / SPECIFICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES

Presentation by Council staff (Robin Frede):

Council staff gave a presentation on the stocks that have updated specifications and other measures included in FW 72. This included the Scientific and Statistical Committee's (SSC) recommended overfishing limits (OFL) and acceptable biological catches (ABC); the PDT's sub-component analyses, the PDT's recommended SNE/MA yellowtail flounder sub-ACL for the scallop fishery, and the draft alternatives.

Questions/Discussion on the presentation:

Questions on OFLs and ABCs by stock:

The Chair observed that allowable catch of CC/GOM yellowtail flounder would go up two to three times based on the updated assessment determining there is a much larger biomass. The Chair noted that use of this stock has been low, but that industry members report that the constraints have been market-related rather than stock availability. A GAP member asked what year CC/GOM yellowtail flounder was indicated to be overfished in the latest assessment and asked if that would require a rebuilding plan. The new assessment indicated the stock was overfished in 2024, but that the stock is no longer overfished as of 2025. The National Marine Fisheries Service must make a formal stock status determination, but its determination of stock status will likely consider the complete set of information in the new assessment.

A GAP member asked why the SSC chose $50\%F_{MSY}$ for SNE/MA winter flounder when the new assessment indicated the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. This was related to a change made in the previous 2022 assessment, during which the assessment looked at environmental conditions (temperature) in the last 20 years and reduced recruitment as indicative of lower productivity of the stock. In the assessment, that assumption lowers the SSB_{MSY} threshold, but did not adjust F_{MSY} and the SSC felt that could potentially result in overfishing being allowed. The SSC recommended this issue for future research.

The Chair observed that the list of uncertainties for the white hake assessment appears to be carried forward from one assessment to the next and asked whether these uncertainties get incorporated into the scientific uncertainty specified within the assessment model. Many of the uncertainties have been carried over from past assessments. Some work has been done on catch-at-age and age-length keys, but the issues have not been fully resolved. These uncertainties are not specified directly within the assessment model.

The Chair noted that both the white hake and Acadian redfish assessments reference seasonal movement in and out of the stock area or into Canadian waters and asked whether that has been explored or if the stock shifts are related to environmental change. These are recognized uncertainties but have not been fully explored yet.

A GAP member asked whether fishery-dependent data was used by the SSC in setting the white hake catch limits and highlighted that the utilization of white hake has been over 90 percent in recent years and cuts will have huge effects on industry. The research track assessments have been looking at catch rates for context, even when that data is not included directly in the assessment. The SSC had a discussion around potential industry effects of the cuts, and the lack of recruitment and an apparent decline in this stock.

The Chair pointed out that it takes redfish 10 years to grow to 9 inches, the former minimum size. He noted that the assessment report stated the Woods Hole Assessment Model (WHAM) better fits survey indices, but that the assessment still required retrospective adjustment. He asked why that was necessary when the WHAM model was intended to address that issue. WHAM assessments typically address retrospective patterns, but the WHAM model used for the redfish assessment was specified to be similar to the ASAP assessment model. Fully transitioning to a WHAM assessment in the future may address the retrospective pattern in the redfish assessment. The Chair also asked whether the SSC or the assessment peer review panel discussed factors other than migration to Canadian waters that might address the change in stock size. There was some discussion that state surveys should be looked at in future redfish assessments, but transitioning to the full state-space model features of the WHAM model may also address this issue.

Questions on the Sub-Component Analyses:

The Chair stated that in-season Atlantic halibut catch estimates from Canada had been used in past sub-component analyses and asked if that had not been possible this year and if that data was critical. The PDT requested in-season data for 2025 from the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans but had not yet received the information. If the final 2024 catch data or in-season 2025 catch data is significantly different than 70 mt used in the analysis, that could have an effect.

Questions on the SNE/MA Yellowtail Flounder sub-ACL:

The Chair asked which area was identified as having the majority of yellowtail bycatch in the scallop fishery in 2025 and noted that the Scallop PDT recommended setting the 2026 sub-ACL at either 90- or 100-percent of the 2025 sub-ACL. The Scallop PDT identified the western portion of the Nantucket Lightship area as having had an unexpectedly high biomass of scallops, and corresponding effort, in 2025. The Scallop PDT was comfortable with the scallop fishery sub-ACL being set at either 90 or 100 percent of the 2025 sub-ACL. The Chair followed up with a question about the uncertainty in the estimate of SNE/MA yellowtail bycatch by the scallop fishery in 2026. The Scallop PDT could not project bycatch in 2026 during the lapse in Federal appropriations but may still be able to calculate an estimate as it completes development of the scallop framework. It was highlighted that the Scallop Advisory Panel had not yet had an opportunity to provide input but would be meeting later in the week. The two PDTs discussed the issue and developed the approach used in the sub-component analyses in the absence of bycatch projections.

Questions on Revised Status Determination Criteria (SDC) for GB Yellowtail Flounder:

The Chair asked whether the SDCs for GB yellowtail flounder are required. The National Standard 1 Guidelines require SDCs to be established for all stocks in a fishery management plan.

Note: The Groundfish Advisory Panel did not have a quorum. The Groundfish Advisors proceeded in discussion format for those advisors present (4).

DISCUSSION STATEMENT 1:

Groundfish Advisors in the meeting support Action 1, Alternative 2 – Updated Status Determination Criteria for Georges Bank yellowtail flounder.

Questions and discussion on the Chair's presentation on White Hake:

A GAP member pointed out that the geographic range of white hake is expanding and explained it was the first time he had to lease quota for white hake bycatch in the southern Gulf of Maine. The GAP member highlighted that white hake is not a target stock and without a sufficient quota all targeted stocks will be constrained.

Another GAP member asked about the process and timeline if the Council remanded the white hake ABCs to the SSC. The process followed for white hake in December 2022 is a model. At that time, the Council accepted the first year of the SSC's recommendations but made a motion to request the SSC increase the ABC in later years to be based on $75\%F_{MSY}$, rather than the $F_{Rebuild}$ of $70\%F_{MSY}$. The Council would need to request the SSC reconsider the ABCs for white hake for 2026 and future years. The Council could request the SSC reconsider the ABCs using $75\%F_{MSY}$. The soonest the SSC could meet would likely be in January and would mean a delay of at least 1 month in the submission of FW72 to GARFO. The criteria for requesting reconsideration of the ABCs are less than the criteria for a remand to the SSC based on an error or failing to follow the ABC control rules.

The Chair proposed a request to the Council to ask the SSC to reconsider the white hake ABCs if possible. A GAP member asked how much of an increase in the ABC or ACL would result from a change to using $75\%F_{MSY}$ and what that would provide to the industry. Such a change would result in an increase of roughly 5%, which would be roughly 100 mt. There would need to be a new analysis of the effect on the rebuilding plan. When this was evaluated in 2022, there was not a significant effect on the rebuilding plan. The GAP member raised concern that this could jeopardize having FW72 effective on May 1, 2026, by making a late change after a prolonged agency shutdown.

DISCUSSION STATEMENT 2:

Some of the Groundfish Advisors in the meeting support consideration for setting white hake catch advice at a higher risk level for FY2026 through the next assessment.

For purposes of discussion - 3 *did support* and 1 *did not support*

Rationale provided for discussion:

- The stock is neither overfished nor subject to overfishing.
- The 2025 assessments of SSB over time significantly depart from the relatively close convergence of the prior 6 assessments, raising concerns of error.
- There is a significant disparity between the assessment's perception of a biomass 33% lower than the 2022 estimate, versus commercial fishermen's realization stable catch rates, ACE lease prices, and limited ACE availability over the last 4-5 years.
- White hake is a critical stock to the commercial groundfish sector program (commercial multispecies and some monkfish trips). In recent years it has largely been caught incidentally.
- Catches have been consistent between 1,700 mt and 2,000 MT over the past five years. Utilization has been over 90% over the past five years.
- Its strong availability across its stock range is seen by both inshore and offshore vessels.
- There are no signals within the commercial data (reduced age, contracting spatial footprint, or lower CPUE) that indicates a significant concern with white hake.
- The assessment shows two years of modest increases in recruitment, and some groundfish sectors report an increasing proportion of landings in the first six months of FY 2025 are of the smaller size classes.

Discussion on Acadian Redfish:

The Chair stated the fishery is facing a significant quota reduction in redfish in 2026 based on the SSCs recommendations. He raised several concerns. First, that a reduction in the number of trips targeting redfish, due to the reduced redfish quota, would result in more trips being redirected to target other stocks in other areas. Second, the assessment report stated that holding mean weight-at-age constant fails to capture possible density-dependent shifts in reproductive schedules and noted the new WHAM assessment fails to fit the most recent 2 years of the fall survey index. The Chair wondered if the stock was declining from a high regime, rather than due to fishing pressure. He noted the assessment referenced movement of the stock to Canadian waters and asked about a possible environmental shift, particularly because of the absence of shrimp. The Chair highlighted that age 1 recruitment varies greatly and stated that redfish need approximately 10 years to grow to 9 inches in size. Looking at recruits since 2017, the Chair was hopeful the fishery would see more 9-inch fish beginning in 2028.

The Chair proposed recommending reconsideration of the Acadian redfish ABCs with a higher risk tolerance and evaluation of a suspension of the redfish exemption program for the same time period. Three GAP members supported this. One GAP member was concerned about how this would affect the timing of FW72 and also because redfish is a long-lived and slow-growing species. The dissenting member felt that life history magnifies risks and did not want to put the fishery into the position of needing another 50-year rebuilding plan.

DISCUSSION STATEMENT 3:

Some of the Groundfish Advisors in the meeting support consideration for setting redfish catch advice at a higher level of risk level for FY2026 through the next assessment. Groundfish advisors also support consideration for examining the redfish sector exemption program and impacts of a potential suspension of the redfish sector exemption program on catches and quotas.

For purposes of discussion - 3 did support and 1 did not support

Rationale provided for discussion:

- The stock is neither overfished nor subject to overfishing.
- The recent reduction in SSB may just reflect a natural decline from a high abundance regime, similar to what may be occurring in the lobster fishery at present.
- It's possible reduced prey availability may be affecting stock population. Among other shrimps, redfish feed on *Pandalus borealis* which has apparently largely vacated the Gulf of Maine. Adults and larvae alike feed on among other copepods *Calanus finmarchicus*, whose abundance declined from 2015-2020. [Bigelow & Schroeder; *Climate impacts on the Gulf of Maine ecosystem: A review of observed and expected changes in 2050 from rising temperatures*, Pershing et. al.]
- Two relatively strong recruitment classes (for years 2017-2024; average 11,000) should recruit to the fishery in roughly 2027-28 (18,000) and 2029-2030 (34,000).
- The stock assessment notes a decline may be partly a result of migration to Canadian waters.
- The stock assessment readily acknowledges missing age data requires some assessment metrics (maturity, fishery selectivity) "to be held constant over time, which is unlikely to reflect reality," and ongoing problems with retrospective patterns even with the new WHAM model.

General discussion and questions:

A GAP member asked whether setting 5-year specifications precluded revising the specifications sooner and whether that would require a new assessment. The Council's intent is to set specifications for 5 years, but to be able to revise them sooner when new assessments or data updates are available.

The Chair noted that all GB cod in 2025 is allocated to the east but can be converted to the west where it will be caught and asked if that would affect the U.S. share in future years. The current allocation would not affect future shares. This is only a U.S. biomass apportionment and resulted because Canada only assesses the eastern portion of the stock. Another GAP member asked whether the revision to the apportionment method only affected the current year, noting it would have made a big difference if the changes could have been incorporated into this current fishing year, and asked why it had not been avoided for the current year if that was a possibility. The NEFSC previously acknowledged the importance of correcting the strata included in the apportionment calculation. The large decline in haddock was reflective of the most recent assessments showing a decline as well as a shift in biomass location. The apportionment method was used only to determine how much of the available quota was allocated to the eastern and western U.S./Canada areas. The GAP member expressed a desire for the apportionment to be addressed for cod as well as haddock in future years. In response, the GAP developed discussion statement number 4.

DISCUSSION STATEMENT 4:

Some of the Groundfish Advisors in the meeting support the recommendations for the U.S. biomass apportionment method from the SSC and TMGC, particularly around those supporting incorporation of fishery catch data.

For purposes of discussion - 3 *did support* and 1 *did not support (abstained)*

DISCUSSION STATEMENT 5:

Some of the Groundfish Advisors in the meeting support adding to 2026 Council priorities revisiting the white hake rebuilding plan.

For purposes of discussion - 3 *did support* and 1 *did not support*

DISCUSSION STATEMENT 6:

Some of the Groundfish Advisors in the meeting support the proposed 2026 U.S./Canada TACs.

For purposes of discussion - 3 *did support* and 1 *did not support (abstained)*

DISCUSSION STATEMENT 7:

Some of the Groundfish Advisors in the meeting support under Action 2/Alternative 2 - Revised Specifications, the FY2026 specifications for GB cod, GB haddock, and GB yellowtail flounder.

For purposes of discussion - 3 *did support* and 1 *did not support (abstained)*

DISCUSSION STATEMENT 8:

Some of the Groundfish Advisors in the meeting support under Action 2/ Alternative 2 – Revised Specifications, the FY2026-2030 specifications for all stocks listed except those noted earlier (white hake and redfish).

For purposes of discussion - 3 *did support* and 1 *did not support (abstained)*

DISCUSSION STATEMENT 9:

Some of the Groundfish Advisors in the meeting support the PDT's sub-component recommendations.

For purposes of discussion - 3 *did support* and 1 *did not support (abstained)*

DISCUSSION STATEMENT 10:

Some of the Groundfish Advisors in the meeting support the PDT's recommendation for the SNE/MA yellowtail flounder scallop fishery sub-ACL.

For purposes of discussion - 3 *did support* and 1 *did not support (abstained)*

AGENDA ITEM #2: OTHER BUSINESS

The Chair communicated that concerns about pollock raised at previous meetings by the Nieuwkerks had not been forgotten and had been referred to the Enforcement Committee.

There was no update available on the status of FW 69 because work on that action was not exempted from the government shutdown.

The meeting adjourned at 12:31 pm.