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New England Fishery Management Council

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DRAFT MEETING SUMMARY

Joint Groundfish Committee and Groundfish Advisory Panel

Webinar

May 27, 2026

The Groundfish Committee (Committee) and Groundfish Advisory Panel (GAP) met jointly on May 27, 2026, via webinar to 1) receive a draft report on the Amendment 23 Review of the Groundfish Sector Monitoring Program, and 2) discuss other business, as necessary.

MEETING ATTENDANCE:

Groundfish Committee: John Pappalardo (Committee Chair), Terry Alexancer (Committee Vice-Chair), Andy Dangelo, Peter Christopher, Geoff Smith, Jim Gilmore, Megan Ware, Michael Pierdinock, Paul Risi, Peter Whelan

Groundfish Advisory Panel (GAP): Hank Soule (GAP Chair), Cassie Canastra (GAP Vice Chair), Ben Martens, Bonnie Brady, Joe Letourneau, Rick Bellavance

Council staff: Robin Frede (Groundfish Plan Coordinator), Julian Garrison, Mark Grant (NEFMC staff); Angelia Miller (Maris Collaborative)

In addition, about 27 other people attended, including: Caroline Potter, Danielle Palmer, Laura Smith, Liz Sullivan, Spencer Talmage (NMFS GARFO staff); Cameron Day, Chad Demarest, Dr. Debra Duarte, Gabrielle Clardy-Pryor, Glenn Chamberlain, K.B. McArdle, Mary Sheehan, Matt Cutler, Nichole Rossi, Paul Nitschke (NMFS NEFSC staff); Mitch MacDonald and Scott Sakowski (NOAA General Counsel).

KEY OUTCOMES

- There were no motions made because the meeting was held to receive a report of the Amendment 23 Review.
- Information on additional analyses supporting the Amendment 23 Review that were not complete in time for this meeting will be presented at the June 10, 2026, joint meeting of the Committee, GAP, and Recreational Advisory Panel.

This was a joint meeting of the Committee and GAP. Each group separately asked questions on the presentation and then had a shared discussion.

AGENDA ITEM #1: AMENDMENT 23 MONITORING REVIEW

Presentation by Council staff:

Council staff presented analyses conducted by a sub-group of the Groundfish Plan Development Team (PDT) in support of the Amendment 23 Review. The PDT had identified three review questions (and themes) that explore multiple aspects of the groundfish sector monitoring program and would evaluate how successful the program is in achieving its goals. Information was presented on the 20 metrics previously approved by the Committee, grouped by the three themes. Data from the maximized retention electronic monitoring (MREM) program was excluded from analyses because it was suspended the same year that Amendment 23 was fully implemented.

The Data Impacts theme included catch, bias, the exclusion of some trips from the at-sea monitoring (ASM) requirement, and the removal of management uncertainty buffers (MUB) at certain ASM coverage targets. The Fishery Impacts theme included the costs of the program – overall, for NMFS, and for the industry. It also included potential changes to where fishing occurs, and which ports are used, to evaluate potential spatial observer bias. The Program Reach theme included vessel participation in monitoring programs, electronic monitoring (EM) review rates, ASM Coverage targets, achieved coverage, and details of how coverage was assigned and distributed to look at coverage equitability.

Council staff presented the analyses for each review theme, then answered questions on that theme before moving to the next theme. A discussion of all themes was held at the end.

Data Impacts Theme

Council staff presented results for several metrics: M1 Observer Bias, M2 Biased Vessels, M3 Magnitude of Bias, M6 Discard Estimates, M10 Exclusion Catch, and M11 MUB. Results for M9 Catch Allocation were still in development. Council staff explained that there have been important changes since the original analyses were completed for Amendment 23 (e.g., database changes, changes in constraining stocks over time, global pandemic implications, achieved coverage) and the changes make it difficult to draw clear conclusions from some of the updated analyses. Conclusions were also presented by Council staff. Failure to see a clear observer effect pattern in the data under higher achieved observer coverage is consistent with the hypothesis that higher coverage would address bias. The increased coverage did not eliminate observer bias, but reduced the effect it has on data. The source of discard data for commercial groundfish trips has shifted from predominantly being calculated using discard rates (2018-2021) to primarily coming from observations by ASM and reviewed EM (2022-2024). Trips excluded from the ASM requirement have limited observer data, but discards rates are lower on those trips than other trips. Council staff highlighted that the Amendment 23 review work does not generate a single ASM coverage level to address bias.

Questions on the presentation:

The GAP chair asked several questions. First, how the review would address the objective to determine whether the value of data has been maximized. This is a subjective question that may best be addressed by the GAP, Committee, and Council. Second, how the decline in total discards is tied to data accuracy. That may be attributed to both lower total catch over time and improved accuracy, with more details provided in the written report. Third, whether observed declines in catch on observed trips is explained by shorter trip lengths when observed. Fourth, did the vessel-level bias analysis determine that unobserved trips continue to be biased with the bias on different vessels differing in direction. The graphic presented showed kept catch for all vessels. Unobserved trips continue to show bias. Details for all the metrics will be provided in the report, but there are similar trends for all metrics. A GAP member noted the data are noisy and highlighted that there are many types of trips, and suggested there could be value in further separating data to analyze at a finer scale. Levels of observer effect vary between different vessels and it is a management decision to determine the level at which the monitoring program should be evaluated. Consistent with Amendment 23 applying to the entire sector fishery, the analyses generally evaluated effects across the fishery as a whole. A GAP member also asked whether the PDT had compared data from EM trips that also carried a Northeast Fishery Observer Program (NEFOP) observer. There are very few of those trips and they have not been analyzed, but that is a potential future analysis.

A Committee member asked how vessels on the vessels of concern (VOC) list were handled in the analyses. In some cases, vessels on the VOC list were excluded from the analyses and the report will clearly state which data is included in each analysis. The Committee member also asked what the actual discard rates were, particularly in trying to understand the work presented on using bias estimates to set coverage targets. The work presented showed an approach that managers could use to set a coverage target based on the estimated magnitude of (e.g., 2x, 3x) bias. A precise value for actual discards, accounting for bias, was not available during the meeting, but might be something the PDT could estimate.

Another Committee member asked about the source of data for analyses, particularly the analysis of vessel-level observer bias, and asked which analyses include EM and which exclude EM. Unlike the original analyses conducted for Amendment 23, EM vessels were excluded from the new analyses of observer bias (i.e., comparisons of a vessel's observed and unobserved trips) because all EM trips are considered observed (selection of EM trips for review occurs after trip completion). Additional analysis, not presented at this meeting, shows that the EM fleet is not representative of the larger groundfish fleet because EM vessels take shorter trips and have less catch. The Committee member then asked whether the caterpillar plots showing bias were comparing observed trips to unobserved trips of individual vessels. Those plots compare individual vessels' trips to show the bias of the individual vessels as distinct vertical bars (anonymized). For the original Amendment 23 analyses, an observed trip was only analyzed if it was perfectly sequenced between two unobserved trips (U-O-U) by the same vessel, using the same gear, within a tight timeframe. Due to the reduced number of unobserved trips in recent years, observed trips were compared to the nearest (within 30 days) unobserved trip (Flexible Nearest-Neighbor Pairing).

Another Committee member asked about the analysis comparing landings and effort ratios between observed and unobserved trips, and what the figures were showing. This analysis was a repeat of work previously done for Amendment 23 and looked for consistent patterns over multiple years where catch of a stock was consistently higher or lower on observed trips than it was on unobserved trips. The updated analysis is harder to draw conclusions from due to the smaller sample of unobserved trips, but generally shows that, from 2022 through 2025, we no longer see the same persistent pattern where vessels kept more cod on observed trips than on unobserved trips. This is consistent with the hypothesis that increased observer coverage would reduce the effects of bias, but important changes (databases, constraining stocks) may also be contributing to the results. The Committee member also asked whether the numbers in the boxes on the figures were significant. The difference in the magnitude of the values is hard to interpret and is less important than the overall trends. Detailed values for the analysis, in addition to the patterns presented at the meeting, will be included in the final report.

Regarding cumulative distribution figures, a Committee member asked whether the gap between solid and dashed lines indicated the magnitude of bias. That gap shows the magnitude between means (for multiple metrics) between observed and unobserved trips. The report will include values and labeled axes for the figures, and the results of statistical tests for significance.

A Committee member asked difference between dashed and solid lines in the figures present the proportion of fishery attributed to vessels with observer bias between 10% and 40%, and vessels with greater than 40% bias. The solid lines are the proportion of the fishery metric (catch, value, effort) coming from the vessels in each group while the dashed lines are the proportion of vessels in each group. In the report, additional information will be included to clarify the figures.

A Committee member asked about the decline in discards in the discard estimate table presented. The vertical bars show discards (in mt) by year. Within each bar, colors show the proportion of a year's discards coming from different sources: ASM-observer, NEFOP-observed, EM-observed, or calculated using a discard rate. Overall, discards declined from over 800 mt in 2018 to a low of <500 mt in 2021 and has been steady at slightly over 500 mt in 2022, 2023, and 2024. The source of discard data for commercial groundfish sector trips has shifted from predominantly being calculated using discard rates

(2018-2021) to primarily coming from ASM (2022-2024). Lower discards are likely related to the overall reduction in catch and the discards are more definitive because a greater proportion of discards are directly observed.

Collectively, the meeting suggested detailed captions and annotations for all figures in the report. An analyst stated the report would attempt to identify when differences were meaningful for management as distinguished from statistical significance.

Fishery Impacts Theme

Council staff presented results for two metrics: M12 Total Monitoring Costs and M13 Industry Monitoring Costs. Results for M14 Cost Efficiency and M18 Spatial Observer Bias were still in development. Conclusions were also presented by Council staff. Total monitoring costs have increased. The majority of the cost increase is attributed to the increase in coverage, but industry monitoring costs per observed ASM day absent have increased ~6%. Staff informed the Committee that additional work was underway in industry costs, cost efficiency, and spatial observer bias.

Questions on the presentation:

The GAP Chair asked whether the table of total costs was budgeted costs or realized costs. The table presented included budgeted costs based on approved spending plans for Congressional appropriations. The GAP chair asked whether realized cost information and the value of the fishery are available. Those costs will be included and broken out in the report, along with fishery value. In response to further questions on industry costs, Council staff explained that industry ASM costs presented were based on the reimbursements to the sectors and invoiced costs will be included in further analyses.

A Committee member asked if there would also be a detailed breakdown of industry EM costs. Similar analysis of EM costs is underway.

Program Reach Theme

Council staff presented results for a number of metrics: M20 ASM Coverage Targets, M19 Achieved Coverage, M28 Waiver Counts, M29 Acceptance Rates, M31 Refusals, M32 Incidents, M33 Pre-Trip Notification System (PTNS) Notification Compliance, M34 PTNS Cancellations, M27 Coverage Equitability, M28 Distribution of Vessels, and M39 EM Video Review Rates. Conclusions were also presented by Council staff. The expansion of the sector monitoring program has been successful with achieved monitoring coverage between 81% and 86% in 2023-2025. Each of those years the MUB was removed for some or all stocks. Trip acceptance rates by providers increased throughout the time series and became less variable. Trip cancellation rates gradually increased for fixed-date trips (consistent with the increase in coverage), while cancellation rates for flexible trips were more sporadic. Cancellations peak in two time windows: between 0 and 24 hours of trip start, and between 24 and 48 hours of trip start. Fleetwide PTNS compliance rates are consistently high, between 95% and 97%. More incidents are reported as a result of increased coverage, but the proportion of incident types remains consistent with refusals remaining low. Coverage waivers have declined with higher coverage targets and most waivers are initiated by NMFS and are related to safety. Achieved coverage rates are variable between sectors, but generally follow the target coverage rate. Achieved coverage increases with the coverage target. Achieved coverage is generally only slightly behind the target, with 2020 being an exception due to the global pandemic. Coverage equitability is open to interpretation and is ultimately the purview of the Council.

Questions on the presentation:

The GAP Chair asked whether the numbers shown for incident reports and refusals were percentages or counts. The y-axis for the incident reports and refusals bar charts is proportion. For each year, this shows

the proportion of each incident type in that year. Analysts avoided giving a count due to confidentiality concerns but will consider providing percentages for each type. At the suggestion of the GAP chair, analysts will investigate the potential to further aggregate the data to provide counts while protecting confidentiality. The GAP Chair then asked about the Between Sector Equitability Measure figure presented. This analysis was presented as a bar chart showing the proportion of sectors with achieved coverage higher or lower than expected given the coverage target. While achieved coverage varies more among individual vessels, analysis is conducted at the sector level to be consistent with the design of the monitoring program. The color gradient used is roughly analogous to a single standard deviation, to measure variability. In 2023 through 2025, equitability between sectors improved. A similar approach is used for the coverage waiver figure.

Another GAP member asked about noncompliance and whether there is a penalty for a vessel being on the VOC list, particularly in the context of coverage equitability. With higher coverage targets, being on the VOC has a larger effect. Particularly, with a 100-percent coverage target, any unobserved trip cannot be made up. An analyst explained that most VOC placements are relatively short, but noted there are special circumstances.

A GAP member suggested breaking down the Program Reach analysis into smaller pieces with written explanations. This will be incorporated into the report.

Discussion

The GAP Chair reiterated their preference to see as many discrete numbers as possible in the report (in addition to percentages, proportions, or standard deviations), and clear legends, data sources, and written conclusions to accompany all figures. The GAP Chair pointed to the continued existence of observer bias (on unobserved trips) after implementation of Amendment 23 and asked whether there is anything sectors could do to address that bias. The GAP Chair explained there are some things that can be identified at the sector level by the manager, but asked if there are additional analyses or data sources NMFS could provide. As an example, they suggested providing sector managers with the subset of trips that catch more fish when observed, but also asked what level of statistically significant observer bias has a meaningful effect on catch reporting. The GAP Chair concluded by asking what value the analyses provide to catch accounting for sectors and the industry. Another GAP member commented that understanding the value and equitability of the monitoring program are subjective, and suggested that a risk analysis of trip types or fishing areas might be a useful approach. As an example, they asked if it was possible to identify trips with greater incentives to misreport and to prioritize observer coverage for those trips, and highlighted the upcoming change to the cod stock structure in the FMP as making this an important consideration.

A Committee member agreed with the GAP Chair's comments and requested that the report translate figures into pounds of fish to provide meaning. The Committee member also suggested a comparison of observed trips between the sector fleet and the common pool fleet could be informative because common pool vessels do not have discard restrictions. Another Committee member expressed support for the direction of the analyses, reiterated interest in having finer-scale details in the report, and suggested taking a step back to look at the program at a higher level with regard to the design of the sector system and the reporting incentives it creates. A third Committee member echoed the need for the report to include details and takeaways from individual figures, and request the report relate the analyses to one another to support cumulative conclusions.

A PDT member explained that the PDT struggled with quantifying bias in the original Amendment 23 analyses and that most of the current analyses similarly focused more on determining whether bias continued to exist than quantifying bias. The PDT member pointed out that what the magnitude of bias means to the fishery is a further question that will be challenging to answer. Another PDT member agreed and added that quantifying bias is less challenging than teasing out the details of bias and determining what is meaningful to the fishery rather than only statistically significant.

Council staff announced that additional analytical work would be presented at the joint meeting of the Committee, GAP, and Recreational Advisory Panel on June 10, 2026.

There were no motions or consensus statements.

AGENDA ITEM #2: OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business.

The meeting adjourned at 12:45 PM.