New England Fishery Management Council
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MEETING SUMMARY

Groundfish Committee

Sheraton Harborside Hotel, Portsmouth, NH, and via Webinar

August 25, 2026

The Groundfish Committee (Committee) met on August 25, 2026, in Portsmouth, NH, at 9:30 AM to: 1) Receive updates on Framework Adjustment 68 / Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) Control Rules, 2) receive a final presentation on the Amendment 23 Review and discuss the review, 3 receive updates on Framework Adjustment 74 / Specifications and Management Measures, and 4) discuss other business, as necessary.

MEETING ATTENDANCE: Terry Alexander (Acting Chair), Jackie Odell, Peter Christopher (Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office [GARFO]), Jim Gilmore (MAFMC), Mike Pierdinock, Paul Risi (MAFMC), Geoff Smith, Megan Ware, Peter Whelan (Committee members); Council Staff: Robin Frede (plan coordinator), Mark Grant, Emily Bodell, Dr. Rachel Feeney, Julian Garrison, Dave McCarron, Dr. Cate O'Keefe, Jonathon Peros, Angelia Miller (Maris Collaborative); Presenters: Dr. Roger Brothers, Dr, Lisa Kerr, Dr. Alexandria Schneider (University of Maine).

In addition, about 36 other people attended including: Michelle Cavanaugh, Caleb Gilbert, Danielle Palmer, Caroline Potter, Liz Sullivan, Spencer Talmage, (NMFS GARFO staff); Greg Ardini, Glenn Chamberlain, Gabrielle Clardy-Pryor, Dr. Matt Cutler, Chad Demarest, Dr. Deb Duarte, Amy Martins, Brant McAfee, KB McArdle, Paul Nitschke, Nikki Rossi, Mary Sheehan, Stephanie Weiss (NMFS NEFSC staff); Mitch MacDonald, Scott Sakowski (NOAA General Counsel).

KEY OUTCOMES

- The main outcome of the meeting was a discussion of the Amendment 23 Review.
- There were no motions made regarding either the Amendment 23 Review or Framework 68.
- One consensus statement was made regarding Framework 74 to task the PDT to review the sources of best available science for Atlantic halibut and develop alternative methods for setting halibut catch advice.

GARFO staff provided an update on recent management actions, announcing that final rules had been published for all groundfish actions and that the Monkfish Framework 17 final rule was expected to be published soon.

AGENDA ITEM #1: FRAMEWORK 68: ABC CONTROL RULES

Framework 68 Work Plan

Council staff presented an updated Framework 68 draft work plan. The presentation included an overview of work to date, the current status, and next steps. During fall 2026, the Groundfish Plan Development Team PDT and Committee will focus on alternatives for acceptable biological catch (ABC) stability tools. Focus will shift to alternatives for ABC control rules (CR) during winter 2026/2027. Final action on

Framework 68 is planned for the April 2027 Council meeting. Revised ABC CRs would be used beginning in a 2027 action for ABCs starting in fishing year (FY) 2028.

ABC Stability Tools

Council staff then presented an overview of ABC stability tools that will be included in Framework 68. The objectives of Framework 68 include consideration of ABC stability in CRs, decision rules for the use of constant ABCs, and the ability to use phased-in ABCs and ABC carryover, consistent with revised National Standard 1 Guidelines. Phased-in ABCs (not to exceed 3 years) may be used by a Council to help stabilize catch levels as stock assessments are updated. A carry-over ABC CR allows carryover of a portion of an annual catch limit (ACL) underage into the next year. Constant ABCs are typically used to address uncertainty and risk by holding an ABC constant across years when it would otherwise increase.

Questions/Discussion on the presentation

A Committee member asked whether there is a way to consider interrelationships between stocks in CRs. Staff replied that this has not been explicitly discussed by the PDT, but phased-in ABCs may be one tool to address this issue[1]. Another Committee member asked whether there are instances other than overfished stocks with rebuilding plans where there could be quota reductions that would create issues that may be mitigated by phasing in the ABC. Staff noted there have been positive exceptional years for some healthy stocks, including Georges Bank Haddock and Acadian redfish, where subsequent years saw substantial cuts to the ABC from the record high levels while the stocks remained in a healthy status. A third Committee member asked whether recreational fishery data variability in the marine recreational information program (MRIP) would be considered. Staff clarified the phase-in approach applies at the ABC level, before ACLs are divided into sub-ACLs for the commercial and recreational fisheries.

Public Comment

Maggie Raymond highlighted that, in the past, the PDT has tended to select the lowest ABC value in a projection when recommending constant ABCs and asked whether the National Standard 1 guidance suggests always holding the first year of a projection constant. Staff explained that the guidelines reference the most common example of constant ABCs as holding year 1 constant, but it is important to develop guidance for the use of constant ABCs that is specific the groundfish fishery and that is still in the development phase.

Integrating the Council's Risk Policy into ABC CRs (University of Maine Project Team)

Dr. Roger Brothers presented an update on the project to evaluate integrating the Council's Risk Policy into ABC CRs. A management strategy evaluation (MSE) approach will be used to develop and test potential new ABC CRs for the Northeast Multispecies (Groundfish) Fishery Management Plan. The project uses the Western Gulf of Maine Cod and Gulf of Maine Haddock stocks to demonstrate the differences between and analysis of the three alternative CRs in development. Two distinct approaches for determining the scientific uncertainty buffer are being considered. A simple percentage buffer (e.g., ABC = 75% of OFL) as is used in the current CRs, and a probability-based approach (i.e., P* = acceptable probability of overfishing) similar to what is used in the Atlantic Scallop and Small-mesh Multispecies plans. The percentage of OFL approach is being evaluated with both a dynamic buffer and a set of tiered buffers. The probability-based approach develops a continuous curve that aligns a stock with recommended probability of overfishing informed by the Risk Policy. The project team will use MSE to test the performance of the candidate Risk Policy-integrated ABC CRs. Revised ABC CRs could improve upon the current ABC CRs by: Directly incorporating socioeconomic considerations, allowing a broader range of scientific uncertainty buffers and objective guidance for implementing the buffers, and defining

[1] The National Standard 1 Guidelines at 50 CFR 600.310(d)(2) include the concept of a stock complex and one reason for using a stock complex is when stocks in a multispecies fishery cannot be targeted independently of one another. The Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan does not use the stock complex approach.

an explicit relationship between the assumed risk tolerance and the scientific uncertainty buffer. The next steps include refining the operating models and ABC CRs, reviewing the use of P* in other regions, developing and testing the ABC CRs, considering how the Risk Policy and ABC CRs interact, and presentation to the SSC for review and feedback on alternative Risk Policy-integrated ABC CR options.

Questions/Discussion on the presentation

A Committee member asked about the dynamic uncertainty buffer, who makes the decision and when, and if approval of a new Risk Policy would be an approval of each risk factor. Dr. Brothers and council staff explained that the weights applicable to each risk factor were set by the Council when it approved the new Risk Policy in June 2026. The PDT scores each factor, as specified in the Risk Policy, and then uses the scores and weights to calculate a z-score for each stock that is provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) for consideration when setting ABCs. The scores used as examples in the presentation are not the final PDT scores for the stocks being reviewed by the SSC this year.

Another Committee member asked whether constant ABCs can be modeled as part of the MSE work. Constant ABCs (e.g., 3 years) can be modeled. Staff noted that the technical team could discuss that after the Committee provides additional guidance on constant ABCs from the Committee at its next meeting.

A Committee member asked whether any other council uses a P* approach for a multispecies fishery, rather than a single stock fishery. The Committee member clarified they were looking for risk averse options to facilitate catch of abundant stocks while preventing overfishing of less abundant stocks. Dr. Brothers explained that how P* has been used in other regions will be further evaluated. Multispecies MSEs are challenging. Staff also clarified that the commercial and recreational fishery factor scores in the Risk Policy are meant to address fishery interactions, but do have limitations.

A Committee member asked whether the P* approach can only be used for stocks with an analytical assessment or if it can be used for stocks with an unknown OFL. Dr. Brothers clarified that the P* approach does not require an analytical assessment, but it requires making assumptions that change with the type of assessment and whether or not there are proxies for biological reference points (e.g., F_{MSY}, B_{MSY}). As an example, the small mesh plan uses the P* approach and not all stocks have OFLs.

Another Committee member asked whether spawning stock biomass (SSB) and recruitment were driving the recommended probability of management success in the risk policy curves presented as an example. Dr. Brothers explained that SSB and recruitment do drive probability in the examples and that is partially connected to climate vulnerability and projected future water temperatures affecting recruitment. The Committee member also asked whether 'exceptional circumstances' are incorporated. In general, exceptional circumstances for managing a fishery (e.g., the Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery) are explicitly developed through an MSE.

A different Committee member asked whether the ABC CRs being considered handle constraining stock interactions separately from how those interactions are considered in the Risk Policy. Staff clarified that the Risk Policy includes a commercial fishery factor that accounts for stock interactions and that contributes to the z-score that is used in the ABC CRs. The intent is not to double count uncertainty associated with stock interactions. The Committee member concluded that the Risk Policy is the appropriate place to account for uncertainty. That is how the uncertainty is accounted for in Risk Policy-integrated ABC CRs.

A member of the public asked whether both warming and cooling are accounted for in the climate affects. Dr. Brothers explained that the current Risk Policy scores for climate vulnerability are based on the Hare et al 2016 paper. That work is being updated and is expected to be available next year. The simulations use climate vulnerability to relate future recruitment to projected future temperatures from a current model. It is expected that the model will be more responsive to updated data in the future.

AGENDA ITEM #2 AMENDMENT 23 MONITORING REVIEW

Council staff presented revised and updated analyses evaluating the observer effect within the groundfish sector fishery. Analyses of two secondary metrics were not completed due to time constraints: Catch Allocation by Statistical Area/Broad Stock Area and Spatial Observer Bias. Those metrics would have looked at bias in relation to area. Staff explained how the analysis was originally conducted for the Amendment 23 Environmental Impact Statement and the need to change the method for the new analysis because the initial data set was comprised of trips during a time of low observer coverage and the larger data set for the new analyses includes trips during a time of high observer coverage. The initial revised method, presented to the Council in June 2026, was found to have some problems and a third method was developed that successfully addressed the issues. The differences between the three methods were detailed. The presentation focused on the results of the latest analysis using the final method and those were substantially similar to the results previously presented in June.

The results show that vessel-level observer effects have been ameliorated, but not eliminated, with higher levels of achieved monitoring coverage. In the most recent time period, fleet-wide average behavior does not change when observed. This represents a change in behavior and is not attributable exclusively to biased vessels departing the fishery. Looking at individual vessels, their observer effect changed over time. Some vessels still exhibit bias, but for many vessels the level of bias is reduced. The percentage of vessels with a high level of bias has reduced, and the remaining vessels with high bias mostly cancel out each other's effects because about half are biased in one direction while half are biased in the other direction.

Council staff clarified the goal was for the Committee to ask questions both on the new analyses and any of the previously presented analyses, and for discussion on the full set of review analyses and outcomes.

Questions/Discussion on the presentation

A Committee member asked about the difference in trip length between observed and unobserved trips. The analyses looked at the trip length differences as a percentage. In 2010-2011, observed trips were 6 percent shorter and in 2022-2025 observed trips were only 1.7 percent shorter and that difference is not significantly different. It would be possible to convert that into days and hours, but it would differ between vessel types (e.g., day vessels and multi-day trip vessels) and that information is not in the current report.

Another Committee member asked whether the dramatic mid-year change in the pollock quota in 2010 could have contributed to the difference in trip lengths between observed and unobserved trips in the 2010-2011 period. The method looks at differences in an individual vessel's observed and unobserved trips, and looks across years, to minimize the effects of such changes to isolate effects attributable to being observed. However, it is impossible to completely eliminate effects other than being observed.

A Committee member asked why a 40-percent observer bias was selected as the cutoff for determining high-responder vessels. Forty percent was a subjective decision, rather than a numerical change point. They then highlighted that the high-responder vessels were responsible for approximately 40 percent of total catch in 2025, but that the high-responder vessels appeared to cancel out their effect on the fishery because some were biased high while others were biased low. The percentage of high-responder vessels that are biased high and those that are biased low have changed over time to nearly cancel out one another's effects.

The same Committee member then asked whether it would be possible to look at a change point analysis to evaluate whether there is coverage target less than 100 percent that still maximizes observer provider acceptance of trips and equitability between vessels for coverage selection. It may be possible to conduct such an analysis in the future.

A different Committee member asked about the difference between sea days costs and program costs presented in the review. Program costs are inclusive of training and travel, but not agency costs. Tables

breaking out costs by days absent, trip, and sea day exclude agency costs and look at only vessel costs. The Committee was interested in seeing agency costs because it can limit the coverage target. They then asked about Tier 1 and Tier 2 EM reviews by the agency and suggested a future consideration of reducing a service provider's review rate by the agency, based on performance, to reduce costs.

The same Committee member asked about statements that human at-sea monitors (ASM) and electronic monitoring (EM) collect different information. ASMs collect information beyond catch and discards, including economic and biological data. EM is less expensive, but only captures catch and discard information. They also asked about the statement that costs for converting additional vessels to EM might be higher that the current costs. The statement was made in regard to the potential that the vessels that have already adopted EM are the vessels for which EM would most efficient; thus, EM costs for other vessels could be higher than those currently observed.

Another Committee member highlighted that the report contains some seemingly contradictory statements about observed trips being shorter and landing less fish, but other statements saying that observed trips land more pounds of groundfish. The document text will be revised to update any statements that are not accurate to the final analyses and to clarify when the fleet as a whole is being discussed or vessel-level behaviors, and which time period or metrics (e.g., total catch or catch of one stock) are being discussed in all conclusory statements.

The same Committee member then asked about the annual ratio of groundfish discards to total catch (of all species). Total groundfish discards are consistently less than 2 percent of total kept catch. However, at the stock level, discards may be as high as 100 percent for stocks for which possession is prohibited.

A different Committee member asked whether trips lengths were dock-to-dock times, or the length of fishing effort. In particular, highlight that in some years a vessel may have a longer transit time to fishing grounds while expending the same effort fishing in terms of time. The groundfish sector program does not have possession limits (except for Atlantic halibut) that would affect fishing time. Because the method focuses on the behavior of a single vessel, in a single fishing year, using the same gear, in the same area, in a 45-day window, the effects of seasonality and regulatory changes are nearly eliminated such that the effect of carrying an observer is isolated.

A Committee member highlighted that the fishery changes dramatically from year to year (e.g., ex-vessel prices, leasing prices, and stock assessments). They then asked whether coefficients of variation (CV) were calculated for stocks. CVs were not calculated because that metric was not selected by the Committee. The Committee member then asked whether costs had been broken out by gear or vessel size. Costs were not calculated at those levels due to time constraints.

The same Committee member then asked about a statement in the report that removing the management uncertainty buffer (MUB) for some stocks provided a 'boon' to the fishery, suggesting that removing the MUBs was not a boon to the fishery because it did not result in revenues greater than monitoring costs. Looking at the removal of MUBs it was clear that the fishery used the additional quota freed up by removing the MUBs and concluded that removing the MUBs was a benefit to the fishery.

A Committee member asked whether all analyses used the same correct source of days absent. A single definition (provided in the report) and method was used to identify groundfish trips consistently for all analyses.

Another Committee member asked about the final paragraph in the report and whether the work brings us closer to identifying a coverage level less than 100 percent that minimizes bias. The work brings us closer to an answer, but it is not a simple answer. Several methods were explored by which a coverage target less than 100 percent could be calculated. Those methods require a management decision regarding the level of bias expected. That decision could be informed by the other analyses of bias in the report.

Public Comment

Maggie Raymond asked how many vessels are contributing to vias, noting that $80 million dollars has been spent on monitoring to address the bias. A precise count is not in the report, but less than 50 vessels are high-responders. They then suggested there are ways other than monitoring to identify and address biased vessels given that those vessels can be identified in the data systems. The Committee and Council can discuss and choose alternative methods to address bias, such as identifying vessel size classes or behavior patterns (such as fishing in multiple broad stock areas on a single trip). They then suggested adding an executive summary to the report to improve readability.

Hank Soule, of the Sustainable Harvest Sector, A different member of the public asked whether half of the difference in catch between observed and unobserved trips could be attributed to the difference in trip length. That is correct and highlights that something other than trip length differs between observed and unobserved trips and results in a change in kept catch. They then asked for an explanation of the trip pairs. Any pair consisting of an observed trip and an unobserved trip the by same vessel, in the same area, with the same gear, in a 45-day window in a fishing year was included in the data set, regardless of whether the observed trip was before or after the unobserved trip. 'Controlled' pairs were either two unobserved trips or two observed trips meeting the criteria. 'Treated' pairs were comprised on one unobserved trip and one observed trip.

The same member of the public suggested that the vessels known to be high responders could be evaluated to identify commonalities that could help design an alternative approach to minimizing the effects of bias. They then asked if observer bias had been evaluated in other fisheries. Other fisheries without comprehensive monitoring have been evaluated and had similar findings. However, no other example of a fishery moving from low observer coverage to comprehensive coverage was known the analysts.

A Committee member stated it would be useful to have an analysis of what the fishing industry could afford to spend on monitoring.

Maggie Raymond asked the Committee to forward to the Council a recommendation to address the affordability of the groundfish sector monitoring program. They highlighted that in the absence of Federal funding the coverage target would drop to 40 percent, but that such a change is not a simple flip of a switch and is also unaffordable for the fishery.

Another Committee member stated it is known that the industry cannot afford to pay for monitoring and that the entire management system needs to be considered in light of the monitoring need associated with the current quota-based system.

Discussion turned to the next steps for a response to the Amendment 23 Review Report. The September meeting of the Council will discuss priorities related to the letter sent by NMFS in July 2026. The current list of priorities for 2027 exceeds the Council's abilities. No decisions will be made in September, but priorities will be decided in December.

AGENDA ITEM #3 FRAMEWORK 74: SPECIFICATIONS AND MANAGEMENT MEASURES

Council staff presented an update on Framework 74. This action will set specifications for fishing years 2027-2031 based on new stock assessments or data updates, including exploring the best scientific information available for Atlantic halibut; revise status determination criteria as necessary; review the Georges Bank haddock sub-ACL for the mid-water trawl herring fishery, set that sub-ACL at a fixed level, and discontinue the annual review requirement; streamline the accountability measures (AM) for southern windowpane flounder; and address minor administrative measures. The timeline for Framework 74 was also reviewed.

Questions/Discussion on the presentation

A Committee member asked how much work would be required of the PDT to revise the southern windowpane flounder AM. Staff explained that the alternative is narrowly focused on removing one of the two existing criteria for reducing the size of the AM area and will build upon existing analyses. A larger look at AMs would require more work and would better fit into the Council's plan to holistically look at AMs as well as consideration of Ecosystem Species Component designation as future potential work priorities.

Another Committee member asked whether the work on Atlantic halibut would include evaluating trends in Canadian catch and the locations of Canadian catch. Staff clarified the PDT plans to look at Canadian catch and survey data to evaluate the stock structure and connectivity between U.S. halibut and Canadian halibut.

A consensus statement was developed to formalize the PDT tasking on Atlantic halibut.

Consensus Statement 1:

Task the PDT to review sources of best available science for Atlantic halibut and develop alternative methods for setting halibut catch advice, working with DMR staff who have expertise in halibut tagging data, halibut biology, and associated state regulations.

The consensus statement passed unanimously, and without abstention or discussion.

The meeting adjourned at 4:00 PM.