



New England
Fishery Management
Council



MID-ATLANTIC
FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Discussion on the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (GSCHMA) and Atlantic Surfclam Fishery Access (January 14, 2022, 2pm - 3pm)

Leadership from both the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (MAFMC) and New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) met via webinar on January 14, 2022 (from 2pm-3pm) to discuss the above subject. The purpose of this meeting was to bring the leadership of both the New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils to a common level of understanding on the history of and current issues related to Atlantic surfclam fishing access within the GSCHMA, and identify opportunities to further coordinate on this issue within the scope of the Council process.

Council Leadership: Eric Reid (NEFMC Chair, Habitat Committee Chair), Rick Bellevance (NEFMC Vice-Chair), Tom Nies (NEFMC Executive Director), Mike Luisi (MAFMC Chair), Wes Townsend (MAFMC Vice-chair), Peter Hughes (Surfclam and Ocean Quahog Committee Chair), Chris Moore (MAFMC Executive Director). Council Staff: Jessica Coakley and José Montañez (MAFMC staff), and Michelle Bachman (NEFMC staff).

Staff provided a brief overview of the history of the GSCHMA. The discussion began and it was noted that in addition to the request for this meeting that occurred at the December MAFMC Meeting, there was also a request for emergency action made at the December NEFMC meeting and via correspondence. This request will be taken up by the NEFMC in February.

A question was asked about the Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP; issued to Coonamessett Farm Foundation) in the GSCHMA and if there were any final reports from the habitat data collection that occurred under the permit. NEFMC has not received a final analysis/report.

A discussion about the areas followed. In their correspondence, some industry members indicated that one area cannot be fished year-round because of a seasonal closure, another because of winter weather due to further distance from shore/rough bottom, and yet another has low catch per unit of effort for surfclam. These are areas that had been historically fished, but presently there are not enough surfclams coming out of them to support processing/demand for clams. Some industry members feel they aren't being given fair access, because they applied for an EFP that was denied. One fishing/processing business has fared better because they were allowed to fish under the EFP.

It was noted that it was known when the NEFMC delineated and closed the GSCHMA that it would cause adverse impacts to the surfclam fishery. The NEFMC also knew that impacts would only be partially mitigated by designating the exemption areas. During development of Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2 and the subsequent Clam Dredge Framework, the surfclam industry indicated that they would do the research needed to support opening these areas. To date, the

NEFMC has only received a progress report on the information collected under Coonamessett Farm Foundation's EFP. Another EFP was applied for but has not been approved by NOAA Fisheries.

The request for action is not a specific proposal in terms of areas or seasons where access is requested. It will be difficult to determine whether the request for emergency action would be consistent with NOAA's 2008 policy guidance unless the fishing industry comes forward with more details. The group agreed that more details on the specifics of the request would help the Councils to evaluate whether to recommend Secretarial emergency action.

The group discussed the upcoming schedule for NEFMC: Habitat Committee Meeting (1/18), Executive Committee Meeting (1/21), and February Council Meeting (2/1), during which the emergency action request would be discussed. It was noted that for the NEFMC to take up this work as a Council action in 2022, it would take 2/3 council members voting affirmative (not just a simple majority) to revisit their work priorities.

Follow-up Actions: The group agreed to send an email to the MAFMC surfclam advisory panel letting them know these 3 meetings are happening and that they provide an opportunity to comment on the request for emergency action. Council staff will also reach out to GARFO staff so they are prepared for these discussions. This summary will be prepared by staff and provided to both Councils.