

East Coast Fisheries Governance Projects



Introduction

This document was developed by New England, Mid-Atlantic, and South Atlantic Councils and their partners to provide background information and context for a series of Inflation Reduction Act-funded governance workshops to be held during 2026 and 2027.

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| <i>What do we mean by governance in a fisheries management context?</i> | Governance refers to which groups and individuals are involved in management recommendations and decisions for particular resources, and what their respective roles are relative to one another. |
| <i>What is driving us to consider governance changes?</i> | Environmental changes are causing range expansions, range contractions, or shifts in distribution for many fish stocks. These changes are posing challenges for current governance structures and arrangements, which were mostly established under the assumption that stock locations would remain relatively stable over time. |



What key governance actions were identified during Scenario Planning?

The Councils, Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, and NOAA Fisheries completed a [scenario planning exercise](#) in 2023, to identify actions that would address governance challenges and foster resilience among fishery management organizations in the coming decades. The following governance-focused actions were identified through the process, as shown in the [Potential Action Menu](#):

| Action | Purpose |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| G1. Reevaluate Council committee structure, use, and decision making | Address representation concerns arising from shifting species distributions; enhance efficiency & consistency of committee use across Councils. |
| G2. Re-evaluate and potentially revise Advisory Panel representation | Review AP membership, recruitment, & engagement to improve representation and effectiveness in the management process in light of fishery distribution / socioeconomic changes; identify underrepresented / underserved groups. |
| G3. Develop joint mgmt. agreements to clarify roles and increase efficiency | Identify ways to streamline processes, enhance effectiveness, increase transparency of joint/cooperative fishery management plan agreements. |
| G4. Improve coordination across NOAA offices and regions | Review procedures / identify opportunities for better collaboration / resource utilization among NOAA entities to enhance effectiveness. |
| G5. Evaluate mechanisms for cross-pollination of SSCs | Enhance coordination & knowledge sharing among East Coast Council SSCs and the Commission's science groups, particularly for jointly managed species or those with shifting distributions. |

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Governance-Focused Inflation Reduction Act Initiatives

Each of the Councils received Inflation Reduction Act funding in 2024 for projects that support the actions identified through scenario planning, particularly G1, G2, and G3. The Councils are coordinating closely on these projects, including to plan and host a series of joint governance workshops.

| Project | Objectives | Project Teams |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| NEFMC IRA 4 - Operationalizing the East Coast Climate Change Scenario Planning Initiative | Evaluate and consider adjustments to advisory body structure and use, joint management approaches, and the Council's operating agreement with NOAA Fisheries. Consider opportunities to combine plans within or across Councils Identify permit adjustments to optimize harvest. | Contractors: University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, Monmouth University Staff from NEFMC, NOAA Fisheries, Harte Research Institute, and Gulf of Maine Research Institute Will be informed by the Council's Holistic Strategic Plan. Plan development is ongoing and includes participants from NEFMC, MAFMC, ASFMC, and NOAA Fisheries. |
| MAFMC IRA 3 - Operationalizing MAFMC's Program Review and Improving Council Governance Structures and Processes | Document structure, representation, and use of advisory bodies and recommend improvements. Recommend improvements to joint and cooperative management agreements. | Contractors: Resource Logic and Fisheries Insight Network Staff from MAFMC, NEFMC, SAFMC, and ASMFC |
| SAFMC IRA 1 - Fisheries Management Process Review | Evaluate decision making process, committee and advisory panel structures, and cross-Council/Commission process, and identify bottlenecks and opportunities to improve efficiency and better allocate resources. | Contractors: Akorn Environmental, Cynoscion Environmental Consulting, Bennett Nickerson Environmental Consulting Staff from SAFMC, MAFMC, and NEFMC |

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Workshops

As part of the East Coast Coordination Group's efforts to collaborate on IRA Governance projects across the region, the NEFMC, MAFMC, SAFMC, and ASMFC are hosting a series of governance focused workshops. Initial concepts for potential governance adjustments were developed through the East Coast Scenario Planning process. These ideas require further development through this workshop series and via related IRA projects underway at each of the three East Coast Councils. Workshop planning will be informed by stakeholder outreach and all workshops will generate a report summarizing outcomes. These workshops represent a subset of IRA-funded workshops planned for 2026 and 2027.

| Workshop | Initiative | Purpose | Participants | Dates |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Holistic Strategic Plan | NEFMC IRA 5 | Develop core elements of a draft strategic plan | Primarily NEFMC members, MAFMC, NOAA, and ASMFC representatives | January 2026 |
| Joint Staff-to-Staff Governance | NEFMC IRA 4, MAFMC IRA 3, SAFMC IRA 1 | Discuss advisory body, joint management challenges and identify potential solutions | NEFMC, MAFMC, SAFMC, ASMFC | February 2026 |
| Joint Governance | NEFMC IRA 4, MAFMC IRA 3, SAFMC IRA 1 | Building on February workshop, discuss governance challenges and solutions and identify paths forward | NEFMC, MAFMC, SAFMC, ASMFC members and staff | Fall 2026 |
| Leadership Planning Exercise | NEFMC IRA 4, MAFMC IRA 3, SAFMC IRA 1 | Building on fall workshop, identify specific next steps for action | East Coast Coordination Group members | Winter 2026-2027 |
| Greater Atlantic Regional Operating Agreements Workshop | NEFMC IRA 4 and 5, MAFMC IRA 3, SAFMC IRA 1 | Discuss and revise regional operating agreements between NEFMC / MAFMC and NOAA Fisheries | GARFO, NEFSC, NEFMC, MAFMC, NOAA Office of Law Enforcement | Winter 2026-2027 |

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Workshops, continued

Draft objectives and expected areas of focus have been developed for the Fall 2026 joint governance workshop, and similar themes and objectives will apply to many of the other governance workshops as well:

Joint Governance Workshop Draft Objectives:

- Review information collected and synthesized to date via IRA governance projects or other efforts, including documentation of existing structures and processes and stakeholder feedback collected.
- Develop specific and practical recommendations for improving the governance structures and processes for East Coast fisheries management, building on the input from the staff-to-staff workshop, stakeholder feedback collected via the IRA projects, and the potential action items previously identified through the East Coast Scenario Planning process.
- Provide additional input to inform the final products and recommendations for relevant East Coast Council IRA projects.

Joint Governance Workshop Draft Expected Areas of Focus:

- Use of and representation on Council advisory bodies, including committees, advisory panels, and other relevant technical advisory bodies.
- Improved joint or cooperative management arrangements.
- Use of Council liaisons.
- Other mechanisms to improve cross-jurisdictional coordination and enhance the responsiveness of current governance structures to changing conditions.



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Implementation

Upon conclusion of the IRA projects in 2027, each of the East Coast Councils expects to have project results that provide recommendations to managers on improvements to governance and general coordination. Some recommendations may pertain only to an individual management body, while others are likely to require coordinated action and agreement to implement. High levels of coordination throughout the development of these projects should increase the likelihood of concluding the projects with some synergistic recommendations that management entities could then work together to address.

The Councils and the Commission, in coordination with NOAA Fisheries, could consider changes through vehicles such as changes to Statements of Organization Practices and Procedures (SOPPs), documented joint management or other cooperative agreements, changes to management procedures or coordination mechanisms (formal and informal), omnibus management actions, or FMP-specific actions.



Role of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

The Commission did not receive IRA funding and is not currently undertaking their own governance-related projects. However, the Commission was a participant in the East Coast Scenario Planning Initiative and continues to collaborate with the East Coast Councils on related issues via the East Coast Coordination Group and East Coast Core Team. The Commission is working with the East Coast Councils to support their IRA projects, including participating on project oversight teams. This is particularly important for the governance projects where any changes may have implications for jointly or cooperatively managed FMPs. Joint and cooperative agreements between the Commission and East Coast Councils will be among the focus areas for the upcoming workshops, and other recommendations or best practices (e.g., for AP representation or technical advisory body use) could also be considered by the Commission going forward.



Contact Information

For questions about these projects or other IRA-funded projects, please reach out to:

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