



## New England Fishery Management Council

50 WATER STREET | NEWBURYPORT, MASSACHUSETTS 01950 | PHONE 978 465 0492

Rick Bellavance, *Chair* | Cate O'Keefe, PhD, *Executive Director*

## MEETING SUMMARY

### Monkfish Plan Development Team

webinar

August 7, 2025

The Monkfish Plan Development Team (PDT) met on August 7, 2025, at 10:00 am to: 1) continue developing fishing year (FY) 2026-2028 specifications for the monkfish fishery and 2) other business.

**MEETING ATTENDANCE:** Ms. Jenny Couture (PDT Chair); Mr. Jason Didden (MAFMC); Ms. Sharon Benjamin, Mr. Spencer Talmage, and Dr. Sara Turner (GARFO); Mr. Ben Lafreniere (ME DMR), Dr. Tara Dolan (MADMF), Mr. Eric Schneider (RI DEM), and Ms. Renee St. Amand (CT DEEP); Dr. Rachel Feeney and Ms. Emily Bodell (NEFMC); Ms. Jackie Odell, Mr. John Pappalardo, Mr. Ted Platz, and Ms. Kelly Whitmore (Monkfish Committee); Ms. Aubrey Church (Monkfish Advisory Panel). In addition, about two members of the public attended.

#### **INTRODUCTIONS, OVERVIEW OF 2025 MONKFISH WORK, FY2024 CATCH ACCOUNTING**

Staff introduced the meeting attendees, reviewed the timeline for various upcoming monkfish meetings, and shared the year-end catch accounting data, noting that there was an overage of 1.1% of the ACL in the northern area, resulting in a need to trigger the accountability measure for implementation in FY2026.

#### **Discussion**

One PDT member asked for clarification on the ACL overage in the north and what was meant by not needing to adjust Monkfish effort controls; Ms. Couture explained that the overage is only 1.1% of the ACL versus something more substantial, thus, the effort controls currently in place are likely sufficient.

A Monkfish Committee member asked whether this overage was primarily due to bycatch and if so, were estimated discards similar to prior years. Ms. Couture showed the updated fishery performance figures with the FY 2024 year-end catch accounting data, which showed similar trends in estimated discards in recent years. She noted that there was a reduction in northern ACL through Monkfish Framework 13 and that the northern area generally has high utilization of quota, which was reaffirmed by another PDT member. The GARFO PDT member also noted that the estimated discards for FY 2024 were lower than realized discards in the north and spoke about the need to trigger the Accountability Measures for the northern area, per the NMFS letter sent to NEFMC and MAFMC Executive Directors on August 7, 2025. There was a brief discussion that confirmed the landings values on the slides and GARFO letter aligned.

#### **AGENDA ITEM #1: NEFSC DATA UPDATES**

##### **Presentation**

Ms. Couture provided an overview of the monkfish data updates provided by the NEFSC. This included northern and southern monkfish landings and discards through 2024, NEFSC bottom trawl survey index

of northern and southern monkfish from 1963 through 2025 (biomass, kg/tow), and stratified mean indices at length for the bottom trawl survey for northern and southern monkfish from 1963 through 2025.

## **Discussion**

There was a lengthy discussion on the commercial discards shown in the NEFSC Data Update figures and the disconnect between discarding occurring mostly in the scallop dredge fishery versus the directed commercial fishery. One PDT member noted that the estimated discards do not account for the opening and closing of the scallop access areas and asked about total discard values by gear type; Ms. Couture showed those data tables from the [March Joint Monkfish/Skate other fishery background document](#). The PDT member commented that the amount of discards from scallop dredge gear has fluctuated through time, though it does not constrain the southern monkfish fishery given the low utilization in this area. Another PDT member asked for confirmation whether the revised scallop dredge discard mortality rate of 64% was applied in this data update given this change occurred during Monkfish FW13; staff will follow up with NEFSC on this question as a few PDT members were concerned that this may not have been done.

A Committee member was concerned about showing total monkfish commercial discards and landings given those values are not representative of the directed monkfish fishery and he recommended reorganizing the data accordingly. Staff explained that the data are directly from NEFSC and that the PDT has provided landings and discard information separately that are more reflective of the directed fishery. Another Committee member asked whether the gillnet discard data include discarding from the skate fishery; yes. She also asked whether it was possible to show how monkfish discards have changed over time based on open and closed scallop access areas; Ms. Couture can follow up with scallop staff to see if this information could easily be added to scallop data reports. Another Committee member was interested in understanding skate discards in the scallop fishery; Dr. Feeney (Skate PDT Chair) answered that prior assessments included skate discards by gear type but this was not included in this year's NEFSC Data Update. She also explained the skate discards are largely from scallop dredge and otter trawl gear.

Regarding the stratified mean indices at length for the bottom trawl surveys provided in the NEFSC Data Update, Dr. Feeney shared that a NEFSC biologist during her Skate PDT explained that these figures are now being added for data updates and are pertinent to some species but not all. The biologist cautioned that those figures are not necessarily useful for skates given the species are generally long-lived, have low fecundity, and generally have low catches in the surveys, so any recruitment events are difficult to detect. The PDT was not sure if this was also true for monkfish. One PDT member hypothesized that it appears that there appears to be a spike in smaller length fish in 2017 but that dissipates later in the time series, which could indicate a loss in recruits. He emphasized that the figures are hard to interpret without more robust analysis and suggested that these sorts of figures would be most useful if there was also something substantial in other pieces of information and data and from the fishing industry to denote a recruitment event. A different PDT member appreciated that the length figures clearly show missing survey years and had the same scale. A Committee member agreed with PDT members that unless there is something dramatic in those figures and with the survey indices, it is probably best to keep with status quo Acceptable Biological Catches (ABC) for both areas, particularly because he believes the survey results are unrealistic. Staff explained that this is the first year with a monkfish data update and that we do not have established thresholds for whether to adjust management measures and by how much.

## ***AGENDA ITEM #2: MONKFISH FRAMEWORK ADJUSTMENT 17 (FW17)***

### **Presentation**

Ms. Couture provided an overview of the monkfish specifications setting process and measures that are within scope for this year's action (i.e., setting specifications: acceptable biological catches (ABCs), total allowable landings (TALs), and setting effort controls: possession limits and days-at-sea (DAS)). She explained that the purpose of the meeting is to develop recommendations for setting the overfishing levels

and the ABCs for the northern and southern monkfish management areas based on the NEFSC data update for the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) to consider during their August 19<sup>th</sup> meeting. The PDT was also asked to discuss any potential changes to monkfish effort controls based on the Committee tasking of the joint Monkfish/Skate PDTs; this will be further discussed by the Joint Monkfish and Skate PDT meeting on August 21<sup>st</sup>. Lastly, Ms. Couture briefly discussed the revised Council's Risk Policy Matrix, which is provided to the SSC for their deliberations when setting fishery specifications. She explained that Council staff drafted an initial matrix which was then discussed by the full Council's technical staff on July 22<sup>nd</sup> as part of a staff exercise to work through the revised Risk Policy matrix. The PDT was encouraged to provide any edits and/or additional information to the matrix, which will be discussed by the SSC during their August 19<sup>th</sup> meeting.

### **Questions, Discussion on Monkfish Specifications (ABCs, OFLs, TALs)**

A few PDT members suggested status quo levels for northern and southern ABCs given the biomass index values look similar to recent years and there isn't a dramatic upswing or downswing in any of the indices. A Committee member agreed that status quo is warranted and suggested including a note in the SSC memo regarding the anticipated decline in scallop dredge fishing effort in the near future, which could have a positive impact on monkfish through reduced monkfish dredge discards. A couple of attendees suggested speaking with Scallop Council staff and recent framework actions.

A PDT member pointed out that the length data figures are challenging to interpret and that no strong conclusions can be drawn. He suggested that the PDT memo to the SSC include language stating that there is nothing in the data update that indicates the management measures currently in place via the 2022 Monkfish Management Track Assessment are inappropriate. The indices are not substantially out of range from prior years evaluated in the 2022 assessment.

No one on the Monkfish PDT disagreed with recommending status quo ABCs for the northern and southern monkfish management areas to the SSC. There was also no disagreement with recommending unknown overfishing limits for both management areas.

### **Questions, Discussion on Monkfish Effort Controls (possession limits, DAS)**

A couple of members asked about the Monkfish DAS tables and figures and whether those included Northeast Multispecies DAS as well; no, only Monkfish DAS are represented and as such, the figures and data should primarily be used for the southern monkfish management area discussion vs the northern area, which relies more heavily on both Northeast Multispecies and Monkfish DAS. Another PDT member asked how the combination Northeast Multispecies and Monkfish DAS work and how they are represented in the data. The number of these combination DAS is related to the Northeast Multispecies or Scallop DAS on a given permit so if a vessel has 46 Monkfish DAS and only 15 Northeast Multispecies DAS, then that vessel would have 15 combination monkfish-Northeast Multispecies DAS to use and only 31 Monkfish only DAS. The numbers vary by vessel permit and leasing activity.

The GARFO PDT member explained that the fishing occurring only on a Monkfish DAS in the north is in the exemption area from July through mid-September and that this doesn't encompass fishing occurring in the entire Gulf of Maine region. He suggested status quo Monkfish DAS for both management areas given the north has high utilization and if the SSC recommends status quo ABC for the north, then there wouldn't be justification for an increase in Monkfish DAS in the north. He also explained that the presence of skates is a major contributing factor for low monkfish landings and DAS use in the south and that any Monkfish DAS increases may not be effective; he thought status quo Monkfish DAS for the southern area could work best.

A Committee member liked the Monkfish DAS figures and the masked confidential data; he suggested a couple of tweaks to the existing figures to improve readability. He thought that status quo Monkfish DAS could be most appropriate if the SSC recommends status quo ABCs and that generally the fishing industry wants either lower possession limits and more Monkfish DAS or higher possession limits and

fewer Monkfish DAS; this debate is typically between the Southern New England fleet and the Mid-Atlantic fleet, but he's not expecting that to occur this year. He suspects that the presence of skates is the driving factor behind lower monkfish landings and that there should be joint monkfish and skate management. The Committee member explained that some fishermen choose not to fish in the winter because fishing is further offshore and there are horsepower limits, which could help explain why some of the figures don't show a need for more Monkfish DAS. Staff suggested that the group could discuss this further during the August 21<sup>st</sup> Joint Monkfish/Skate PDT meeting and that prior discussions revolved around status quo monkfish effort controls and an increase in skate possession limits.

A PDT member asked whether the Monkfish DAS allocation change implemented through Framework 13 changed any fishing behavior. The change created separate DAS allocations by monkfish management areas and an overall DAS cap across areas (vs having a total DAS cap across areas and a DAS usage cap for the southern area only). A couple of PDT members wanted industry input on this change but did not expect any substantial change in fishing behavior from this.

Lastly, there was a brief discussion on the monkfish offshore fishery declaration code and whether the lack of data in the declaration tables was indicative of no data. GARFO staff explained that she will double-check the data table and make any corrections; she also confirmed that the blank cells in the table are indeed no data. The PDT member who asked the question was interested in understanding whether the offshore fleet was underutilized and if regulations could change to add in more flexibility (particularly because vessels are prohibited from then participating in the Monkfish DAS program once the vessel declares offshore participation). A Committee member explained that this offshore fleet has been underutilized for several years because there is no market for trawl-caught southern monkfish.

### **Questions, Discussion on Revised Risk Policy Matrix**

No questions or discussion on the Revised Risk Policy Matrix.

### ***AGENDA ITEM #3: NEXT STEPS, OTHER BUSINESS***

Ms. Couture summarized overall meeting outcomes and reviewed upcoming monkfish meetings and timeline for final action.

No other business was brought forward; the meeting adjourned at 12:30 pm.