



New England Fishery Management Council

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 30, 2026

PRESS CONTACT: Alex Dunn
978-465-0492 ext. 112; adunn@nefmc.org

Council Addresses Recreational Groundfishing and Initiates Updates to Habitat Designations

The New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) met virtually for their January Council meeting and took actions on the recreational groundfish measures and initiated an Essential Fish Habitat Framework. The Council received updates on a range of initiatives, including strategic planning and risk policy work.

GROUNDFISH RECREATIONAL MEASURES RECOMMENDED TO GARFO AFTER ADJUSTMENT FOR DATA DELAYS

The Council made recommendations for recreational fishing measures for fishing year (FY) 2026 for Western Gulf of Maine (WGOM) cod and GOM haddock. The Recreational Advisory Panel (RAP) and Groundfish Committee provided recommendations for the Council's consideration. However, due to the federal government shutdown, updated Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) data were received after the RAP and Committee reviews.

This new "wave 5" MRIP data, from September and October, showed higher cod catch and mortality than previously analyzed and indicated the RAP and Committee recommendations no longer met the criterion of 50% of model runs remaining under both the cod and haddock recreational sub-ACLs.

The Council's fishing year 2026 recommendations for Atlantic cod are based on the new understanding of cod stock structure, with the intent for implementation of the new cod stock units (including WGOM cod) for May 1, 2026, through Amendment 25 (Revised). Emergency measures remain in place for FY2025 under the existing 2-stock management units, and the Council will transmit a letter to NOAA Fisheries while the final submission on Amendment 25 (Revised) moves toward implementation.

Council Recommendations to GARFO:

Western Gulf of Maine Cod:

- Open season: October 1 - October 31,
- Minimum size: 23 inches, and
- Possession limit: 1 fish per day

Gulf of Maine Haddock:

- Open season: May 1 - February 28/29 and April 1 – 30,
- Minimum size: 17 inches, and
- Possession limit: 15 fish per day

The measures would reduce the current cod open season by one month to October only and maintain the minimum size for haddock proposed for FY2025 but not yet implemented. The Council's recommendations now go to GARFO for final determination.

Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) has redesigned its Fishing Effort Survey, with testing showing improved accuracy and fewer reporting errors; the new design will be implemented in 2026. NOAA Fisheries is also advancing a state-federal recreational data partnership and a strengthened review process to improve the accuracy, transparency, and timeliness of recreational catch estimates.

HABITAT: COUNCIL INITIATES UPDATES TO EFH DESIGNATIONS FOR SCALLOPS AND MOST GROUNDFISH STOCKS

The Council voted to initiate a Framework action to develop updates to Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) designations for sea scallops and many groundfish stocks managed under both the large and small mesh fishery management plans. Staff noted that existing EFH designations are based on data from 2005 while the new 2026 designations will utilize advanced Species Distribution Models (SDMs) to create habitat maps that integrate recent inshore, state, and federal survey data with environmental data such as temperature, salinity, and depth. These new maps will also distinguish between juvenile and adult life stages.

The new designations will be reviewed by species experts, Advisory Panels, and the Habitat Committee, with final Council recommendations expected in early 2027. These updates are administrative only and do not restrict fishing activity, rather they provide scientific information to guide future habitat conservation management. For more information, see the [website](#).

SCALLOPS: COUNCIL ACCEPTS MULTIYEAR REVIEW OF THE LAGC IFQ PROGRAM

A review of the Limited Access General Category Individual Fishing Quota (LAGC IFQ) program was unanimously approved. The review found the program is effective in meeting its goals and identified several issues facing the fleet including increased consolidation, rising dependence on quota leasing, and safety concerns due to an aging fleet. More information will be available on the IFQ Report Information [page](#).

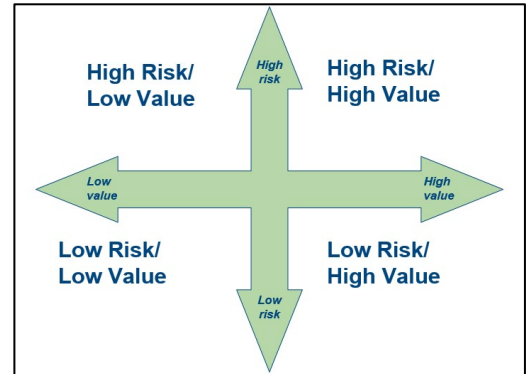
The Limited Access General Category Individual Fishing Quota (LAGC IFQ) is a federally authorized catch share program that allocates a fixed amount of scallop harvest to eligible general category scallop vessels with the goal of controlling capacity and mortality, preventing overfishing, and allowing continued participation by a diverse fleet of small vessels.

LOOKING FORWARD: PRIORITIZATION WORK AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) Funding is supporting modernization of Council processes and fisheries management across eight project areas. These projects include updating groundfish Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) control rules, incorporating ecosystem considerations into decision making, and developing a holistic strategic plan. IRA projects also address governance improvements across jurisdictions and analyze portfolio approaches and risk policy integration to make management more responsive to changing ocean conditions. For an update on all the IRA projects, see the [website](#).

NOAA's Risk/Value Matrix: New England along with the other seven regional Fishery Management Councils (FMCs) are considering NOAA's "Risk/Value Matrix" to support NOAA Fisheries "Framework for Narrowing the Scope of NMFS Management and Science". First discussed at the [May 2025](#) CCC meeting, this work will prioritize management of 500+ stocks nationally using two major categories:

1. **Value** (low to high) which is based on a combination of commercial, recreational, and social indicators;
2. **Risk** (low to high) which includes stock status and climate vulnerability data. For more information, see the Executive Director's [Report](#).



Holistic Strategic Planning: Council members met in January for a strategic planning workshop, launching the region's first holistic strategic plan. Council members and staff along with the Parnin Group reviewed the "Discovery and Gap Analysis" and drafted mission and vision statements and success measures. Participants emphasized the need to proactively address changing ocean conditions, resource constraints, and stakeholder engagement, with a shared goal of moving toward a more forward-looking and adaptive management approach. For more information, view the full [presentation](#).

Risk Policy: Work is moving forward on this management tool which uses a scoring approach to integrate biological, environmental, and socioeconomic risk factors to support management decisions. Council Members will finalize the "weightings" in June, which when combined with the "scoring" for each fishery plan, creates a "Z score" reflecting the Council's risk tolerance. This input will be used in a host of management decisions including setting Acceptable Biological Catch and harvest control rules. In 2026 Risk Policy scores for biomass, recruitment, climate vulnerability, and commercial and recreational fishery conditions will be considered. For more information click [here](#).