



The Council Report summarizes major actions approved at NEFMC meetings or highlights items of interest to stakeholders.

At its June meeting in Newport, RI, the Council:

- ◆ Approved Framework 9 to the Monkfish FMP
- ◆ Asked NOAA to take emergency action to suspend the groundfish fishery's at-sea monitoring program
- ◆ Began work on the 2016-2018 Atlantic herring specifications
- ◆ Finalized the Habitat Amendment for submission to NOAA
- ◆ Initiated work on several sea scallop management actions

Next Council Meeting Sept. 29 through Oct. 1 Plymouth, MA

Council Report

June 2015

Monkfish

NEFMC approves Framework 9

The NEFMC took final action on Framework 9 to the Monkfish Fishery Management Plan. It is developed jointly with the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Council, with New England in the lead. While this framework addresses monkfish issues, it also would modify the region's groundfish regulations. If approved by NOAA Fisheries, it would:

- Allow limited access monkfish category C and D sector vessels *only* to declare, and use, while at sea, a groundfish (or Northeast Multispecies) day-at-sea while fishing in the Northern Fishery Management Area (NFMA).
- Eliminate the monkfish trip limit when on a groundfish/monkfish day-at-sea in the NFMA.
- Reduce the minimum mesh size of standup gillnet gear in the Southern Fishery Management Area (SFMA). Vessels fishing on a monkfish day-at-sea with a stand-up gillnet in the Mid-Atlantic Exemption Area could use mesh a minimum mesh of 5-inches, fish with no more than 50 standup gillnets, and retain dogfish and monkfish.
- Allow vessels fishing on a monkfish day-at-sea in the Southern New England (SNE) Dogfish Exemption Area to use a minimum standup gillnet mesh size of 6-inches, fish no more than 50 standup gillnets from May 1 through October 31, and retain both dogfish and monkfish. Vessels fishing on a monkfish day-at-sea in the SNE Monkfish and Skate Exemption Area could use a minimum mesh size of 10-inches year round and retain both dogfish and monkfish on the same trip.
- Allow a 6.5-inch minimum mesh size for standup gillnet gear while fishing on a monkfish and groundfish day-at-sea in the SFMA.



Photo courtesy NEFSC

The Council opted for No Action on three alternatives that would have: a.) allowed vessels in the SFMA to declare a monkfish day-at-sea while at sea; b.) increased the daily day-at-sea/trip limit allocation for Category F (offshore) vessels; and c.) allowed vessels to re-declare or use a monkfish research set-aside day-at-sea while already at sea using a monkfish day-at-sea. The decisions were made largely on the basis of concerns effort shifts from north to south.

Both Councils, voting at their respective June Council meetings, agreed on the management measures proposed in Framework 9. It will be submitted to NOAA Fisheries later this summer. The Monkfish Committee is scheduled to consider next Amendment 6, an action that will address among other issues, options for catch shares in this fishery.

Info on Framework 55

The Council formally initiated this action in June.

It will include specifications for all groundfish stocks for fishing years 2016 – 2018, including the three U.S./Canada stocks for fishing year 2016, and a proposal for a new sector. Final action is scheduled for this December.

***Note to non-fishing people**

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ACE or Annual Catch Entitlement is a term used in the Council's Groundfish Plan. It is the share of the annual catch limit (ACL) for each Northeast groundfish stock that is allocated to an individual sector.

Groundfish

ASM emergency action requested

To address a long-simmering issue that has been discussed by the groundfish industry and NOAA Fisheries for several years, the Council requested that the agency take emergency action to suspend the at-sea monitoring (ASM) program that currently applies to vessels fishing in groundfish sectors. Its request was based on serious concerns about the economic viability of the groundfish fishery, should the industry pay for a portion of the ASM program.

To provide context, the Council proposed and the agency subsequently approved rules that require sectors to pay for at-sea monitoring via Amendment 16 in 2010, although NMFS has assumed those costs over the last several years. The program is used to verify area fished and catch (landings and discards), by species and gear type, for the purpose of monitoring sector quota.

Today, given the decline of Gulf of Maine cod and the status of a number of other groundfish stocks that are still recovering from overfishing, the Council has expressed concerns that the industry needs immediate relief.

The emergency action request asked for a suspension of the at-sea monitoring program accompanied by an evaluation relative to its effectiveness in support of stock assessments, its total costs to the groundfish fishery, data precision and accuracy, and whether it is actually ensuring catch accountability.

In the event that the emergency request is denied, the Council passed a follow-on motion detailing suggestions about how NOAA Fisheries might use its administrative authority in-season in fishing year 2015 to potentially alleviate some of the financial burden on the industry.

It specified that the agency adjust the 2015 at-sea monitoring program for multispecies sectors through administrative action. The intent of the recommendations are to improve the efficiency of the program through administrative changes that will reduce costs of the ASM program without compromising current standards and requirements.

The Council is also seeking additional information from NMFS to assist in evaluating the performance of the current ASM program in the groundfish fishery in order to inform development of a Council ASM framework adjustment. The intent is to make the program more cost-effective. A timeline is under development.

Electronic Monitoring Working Group weighs in

The Council established its Electronic Monitoring Working Group (EMWG) in April 2013 to examine barriers and develop solutions to implementing electronic monitoring (EM) in the Northeast groundfish fishery sectors.

Since its inception, significant steps toward EM in the region have been taken. Moreover, sectors, NGO partners, and NOAA Fisheries are currently working together to test EM under routine fishing conditions in 2015, with a fully operational EM program option anticipated in fishing year 2016.

Seeking a short-term remedy to the possibilities raised by the above-described scenario, the Council recommended that NOAA allow use of electronic monitoring in the groundfish fishery on a voluntary basis to verify discards of groundfish *ACE reported via fishing vessel trip reports or VTRs.

Atlantic Herring

Work on 2016-2018 specs underway

The good news on the status of Atlantic herring continues. As reported at the June Council meeting, the updated stock assessment conducted this past April indicates that the Atlantic herring resource remains above its biomass target (rebuilt) and below the overfishing threshold (no overfishing). Importantly, this has been the case for this critical forage species since the current management program was adopted by the Council in 1999.

Accordingly, the Council adopted its Scientific and Statistical Committee's (SSC) recommendation to specify the Atlantic herring overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) for the 2016-2018 fishing years, as follows in metric tons (mt):

2016 - 138,000 mt, OFL — 111,000 mt, ABC
 2017 - 117,000 mt, OFL — 111,000 mt, ABC
 2018 - 111,000 mt, OFL — 111,000 mt, ABC

Using a *constant catch* strategy, the SSC's ABC specification of 111,000 mt for 2016-2018 represents a slight reduction from the current ABC specification of 114,000 mt. The SSC concluded that ABC should remain relatively constant, or perhaps be reduced modestly based on the following points, among others:

- A constant catch strategy is the preferred approach of the Council and industry.
- Key attributes of the stock and assessment have changed little since the benchmark assessment, on which the current control rule the current ABC was based.



In its report to the Council the SSC elaborated, noting that "survey indices suggest that the 2011 year class is the second largest in time series and will contribute significantly to the total population abundance and biomass in 2016-2018."

The Council is scheduled to address the remainder of the 2016-2018 Atlantic herring fishery specifications, sub-annual catch limit distributions by management area and river herring/shad catch caps, at the its upcoming meeting in September.

Amendment 8 to the Atlantic Herring FMP

After a review of the scoping comments received on Amendment 8 to the Herring Fishery Management Plan, a report from the Ecosystem-based Fisheries Management Plan Development Team on an ABC control rule, and feedback from the SSC, the Council discussed its goals and objectives for the amendment:

- 1.) To account for the role of Atlantic Herring within the ecosystem including its role as forage;
- 2.) To stabilize landings at a level designed to achieve optimum yield; and
- 3.) To address localized depletion in inshore waters.

Because the Amendment 8 goals approved at the June meeting extend beyond the issues initially identified for the March-April 2015 scoping hearings, the Council will likely re-open the scoping period to solicit comments on the new amendment parameters. Once this occurs, the Council will revise the Amendment 8 Action Plan and timeline.

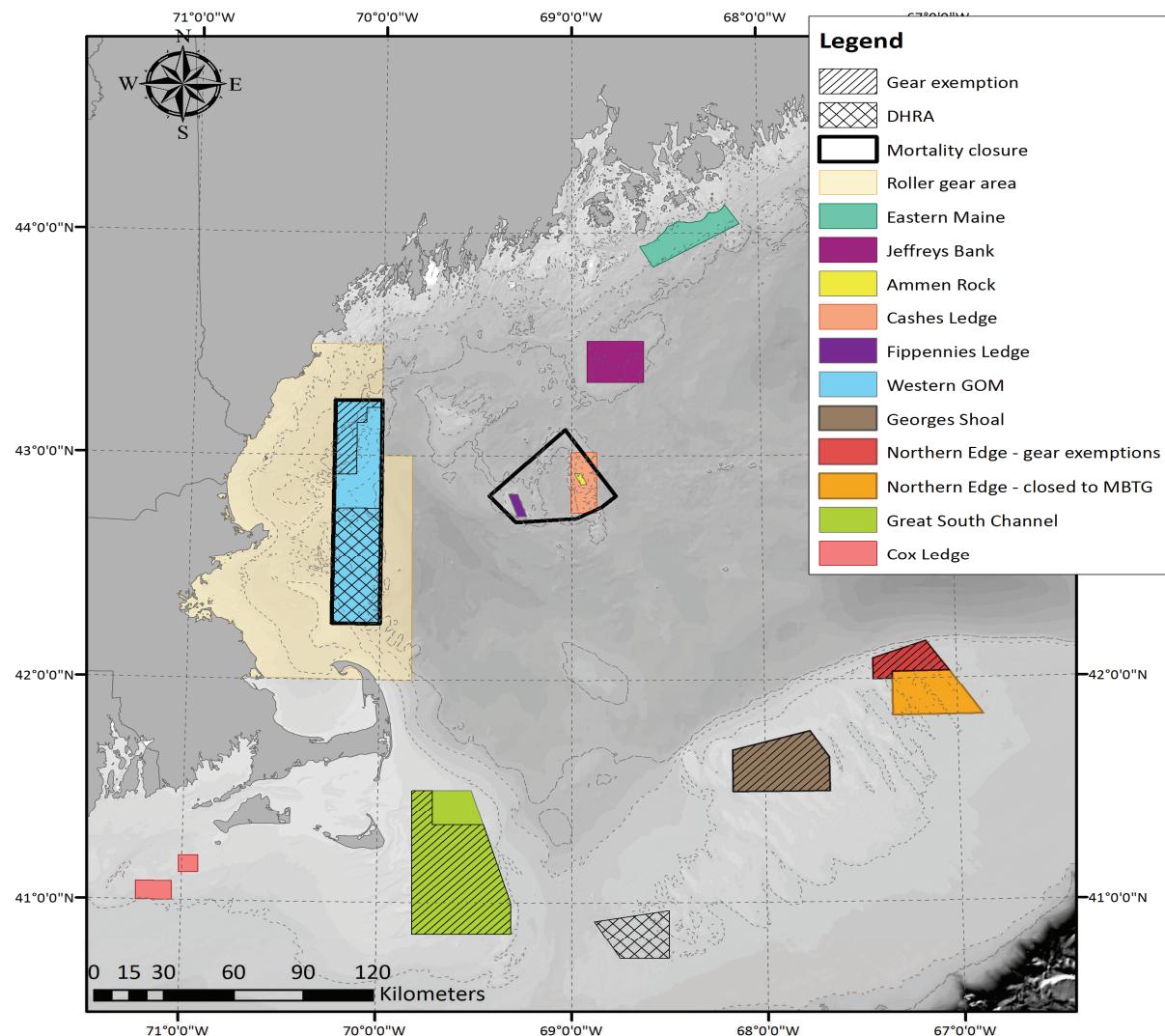
Habitat

Final action on OHA2 approved

The Council completed its remaining tasks concerning final approval of Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2 in June, following actions taken at its April meeting. It identified areas that would be subject to habitat protection on the northern edge of Georges Bank and Georges Shoal and singled out other areas to protect spawning groundfish, both on Georges and in the Gulf of Maine. *Continued on page 6.*

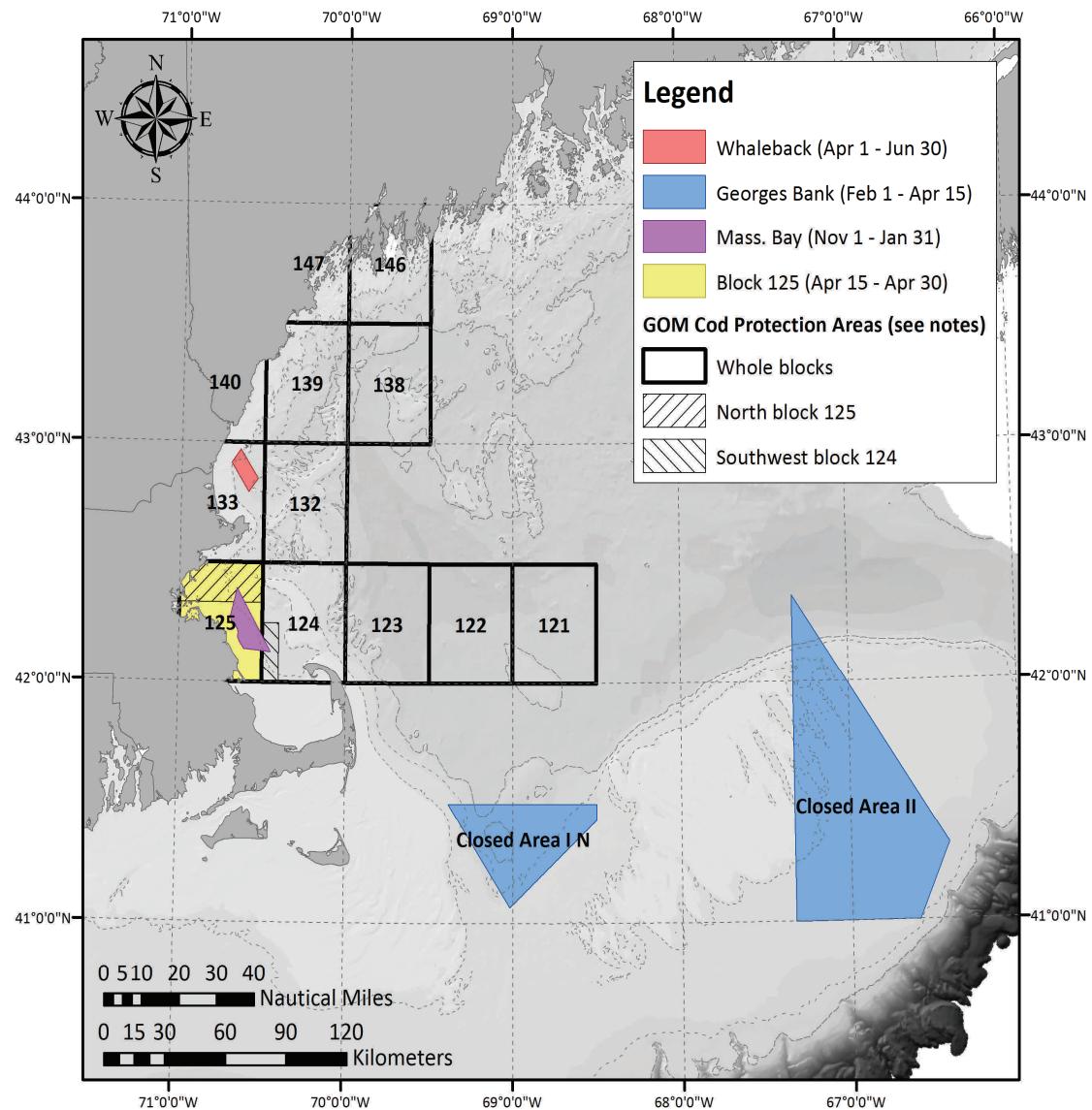
Omnibus Essential Fish Habitat Amendment 2: Final Alternatives as of June 2015 New England Fishery Management Council meeting. Seasonal areas are not shown.

- Gear exemption areas hatched. In western Gulf of Maine, shrimp trawls exempt. In Great South Channel and Georges Shoal, clam dredges exempt for one year. On Northern Edge (red area), scallop access fishing exempt, bottom trawling for groundfish exempt west of 67° 20' W.
- Dedicated Habitat Research Areas are cross-hatched. Stellwagen DHRA (north), Georges Bank DHRA (south)
- Mortality closures shown with heavy black outline. Current gear restrictions.
- Largest shaded area is the roller gear restricted area.
- Other shaded/colored areas are mobile bottom-tending gear closures, with gear exemptions as noted above.
- Cox Ledge closed to clam dredges, and trawls cannot use ground cables.
- Ammen Rock closed to all gears except lobster traps.



Omnibus Essential Fish Habitat Amendment 2: Final Alternatives as of June 2015
New England Fishery Management Council meeting. Seasonal spawning areas only.

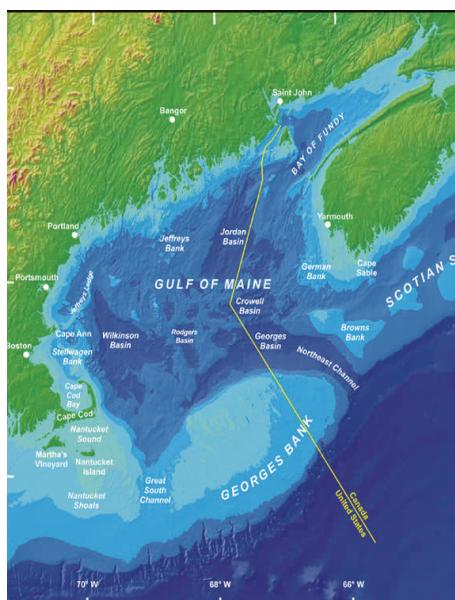
| GOM COD PROTECTION CLOSURES | SPAWNING AREAS |
|---|--|
| Closed to commercial gears with various exemptions | -- Whaleback and Massachusetts Bay Cod Spawning Protection Areas have the same gear restrictions, i.e. closed to commercial and recreational gears with various exemptions |
| Nov-Jan: 125 and 124 (southwest corner of 124 only) | -- Georges Bank areas closed to various commercial and recreational gears capable of catching groundfish, with various exemptions, including scallop dredges |
| Feb: None | ** Block 125 in April is not part of Cod Protection Closures, but was added by Council in June as a spawning area from April 15 - April 30 |
| Mar: 121, 122, and 123 (all areas common pool only) | |
| April: None** | |
| May: 125 (northern part only), 132, 133, 138, 139, 140 | |
| June: 125 (northern part only), 132, 139, 140, 146, 147 | |
| July-September: None | |
| October: 124 and 125 (both areas common pool only) | |



Habitat - continued from p.4

To review, the habitat management areas described below and shown in maps on the previous pages contain habitats of importance to multiple species, are vulnerable to impacts from fishing, and as such, would be subject to gear restrictions for conservation purposes on the basis of gear type.

At the June meeting, the Council approved the Georges Shoal Habitat Management Area (shaded brown on p.4 map) which would be closed to mobile bottom-tending gears including bottom trawls and dredges, with an exemption for hydraulic clam dredges. The exemption for clam dredges would sunset one year after implementation of the amendment allowing time to consider a targeted exemption area or areas to be considered.



Two other Habitat Management Areas were approved, both located on the northern edge of Georges Bank along the U.S./Canada boundary. The area farthest to the northeast (shaded red on p.4) was defined as a reduced impact Habitat Management Area, along with an adjacent area just to the south that was approved as a mobile bottom-tending gear closure (shaded gold, p.4). Hydraulic clam dredges would not be allowed in either area.

Exemptions in the “red area” would include limited fishing access for bottom trawls and scallop dredges. Access for the scallop fishery would be allowed under the current scallop access area regulations, with the specifics of the program to be developed in a future scallop action, and groundfish trawling would be allowed in the relatively small area west of $67^{\circ} 20' \text{ W}$ only.

Because of concerns about impacts to the lobster fishery and resource, any portions of what is currently known as Closed Area II north of $41^{\circ}30' \text{ N}$ would be closed to scallop fishing from June 15th through October 31st. While not included in the amendment, the groundfish industry has an agreement with the lobster industry to abide by similar restrictions.

Spawning Protection Measures

Georges Bank Former Closed Area I was remapped as Closed Area I North, while the boundaries of Closed Area II were retained as seasonal spawning closures. Restrictions for both would apply from February 1st through April 15th to protect spawning groundfish and would affect the use of various commercial and recreational fishing gears that catch groundfish. Scallop dredges would be exempt from the closures.

Gulf of Maine Council members voted to piggyback on to the Gulf of Maine Cod Protection Areas implemented via Framework 53 to the Groundfish Plan, but with modifications. In response to an identified need for increased protections for spawning fish during April, the Council added 30-minute block 125 to these closures for spawning protection from April 15th through April 30th.

The other Framework 53 provisions remain in place. To recap, the closures currently apply to all federally permitted commercial vessels, except for those fishing with exempted gear or that participate in an exempted fishery. As adopted in Amendment 16 to the FMP, sector vessels are exempt from the closures in March and October. The March and October closures also do not apply to Handgear A vessels, regardless of whether the vessel fishes in the common pool or in a sector. The recreational fishery measures in Framework 53 also remain unchanged --- no possession of Gulf of Maine cod is allowed in the closure areas.

In furthering efforts to protect spawning groundfish in the Gulf of Maine region, the Council retained the existing Whaleback Spawning Cod Protection Area and applied its restrictions to a new Mass Bay Area (shaded purple on the p.5 map). All groundfish gear, including recreational fishing gear, would be prohibited.

Sea Scallops

New actions initiated, research priorities approved and more

In addition to the habitat decisions that could affect the sea scallop fishery, the Council worked on a number of other scallop-related items at the Council meeting. Here is a brief summary of the topics and issues covered.

Scallop Survey Peer Review Report Dr. Paul Rago kicked off the discussions by summarizing the findings of an external peer review of the multiple scallop surveys that have been conducted in the region. These include the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's (NEFSC) federal survey; the drop camera survey conducted by UMASS Dartmouth's School for Marine Science and Technology; a towed camera survey conducted by the NEFSC and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, as well as a separate camera survey conducted by the Habcam Group (an industry-supported system), and the dredge survey conducted by the Virginia Institute of Marine Science.

One of the many findings in the report prompted a Council vote in which the NEFMC will ask the Science Center to consider a joint integrated federal scallop survey, possibly using multiple commercial vessels, based on the report's conclusion that there is no compelling advantage to using both dredge and HabCam gears on the same vessel. The motion suggested an outcome that could result in improved survey coverage.

Amendment 19 The Council approved the goal, objectives and range of alternatives to consider in Amendment 19 to the Scallop Plan. Measures to be developed would allow scallop specifications to be implemented for the start of the fishing year. Specific alternatives could involve a more streamlined specifications-setting process than doing so through a framework adjustment, and moving the start of the fishing year to April. Additionally, a handful of other ideas for streamlining were discussed that do not require changes to the regulations. Final action on Amendment 19 is expected at the December 1-3 meeting in Portland, ME.

Framework 27 The Council also voted to initiate Framework Adjustment 27 at the June meeting. At this writing, the action includes fishery specifications for fishing year 2016 and default measures for fishing year 2017. A final Council vote on the framework is also scheduled for December.

RSA Priorities Priorities were approved for the 2016-2017 scallop research set-aside program. Several modifications were made to last year's list based on input from the Scallop PDT, Advisory Panel and Committee. While there were a total of 11, the top three priorities listed in order of importance called for survey-related and by-catch research, and other investigations related to scallop enhancement and the impacts of parasites on scallop mortality.

Workshop Finally, the Scallop Committee reported on updates to a draft white paper and workshop planning concerning potential inshore depletion of scallop fishing grounds and different fishing practices between the limited access and limited access general category fisheries. The Council agreed that a facilitated meeting should be planned. A steering committee will be formed to oversee the details of the workshop that will likely be held in 2016.



**NEW
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FISHERY
MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL**

The New England Fishery Management Council is one of eight regional organizations created by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, initially enacted in 1976.

The Council develops rules for both commercial and recreational fisheries that operate between three and 200 miles off the region's coastline. NEFMC management authority extends to fishing grounds in the Gulf of Maine, Georges Bank and southern New England and overlaps with the Mid-Atlantic Council for some species.

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