The New England Fishery Management Council will be developing a Habitat Area of Particular Concern (HAPC) in Southern New England to place additional conservation focus on Council-managed species that rely on essential fish habitat (EFH) within this area, which is south of Cape Cod.

During its February 1-3, 2022 webinar meeting, the Council initiated a framework adjustment to pursue the new HAPC. It also:

- Discussed the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (HMA) and the clam industry’s request for additional access to the HMA beyond the current three exemption areas (more about this on page 2);

- Received a summary of the white paper titled “Habitat Management Considerations for the Northern Edge of Georges Bank,” which will help inform future discussions if the Council decides to consider habitat management changes on the Northern Edge as a work priority down the road;

- Received an update on offshore wind activities in the Greater Atlantic Region (see presentation);

- Was informed that the Council was finalizing its comment letter on the Amitié Subsea Cable project, which runs between Massachusetts and France and the United Kingdom; and

- Agreed to submit a comment letter on the Running Tide Technology project, which proposes to grow kelp on the northwestern portion of Fiddleness Ledge in the Gulf of Maine.

Southern New England HAPC: The Council expressed concern about offshore development activities in Southern New England that could impact scallops, Atlantic cod, which spawn in the area, and other species that rely on habitats there for various stages of their life cycles. More specifically, the Council was
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Great South Channel Habitat Management Area with Clam Exemptions, Research Areas

HAPCs versus HMAs
- Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs) are non-regulatory and have no restrictions on fishing activity within the designation.
- Habitat Management Areas (HMAs), on the other hand, do have gear-based restrictions on fishing to minimize adverse effects of fishing on essential fish habitat.

Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (HMA)
The Council also discussed the current clam dredge exemptions within the Great South Channel HMA (see map at right). The HMA was developed under the Council’s Omnibus Essential Fish Habitat Amendment 2, which was implemented in 2018 with a one-year exemption from the HMA’s mobile bottom-tending gear restriction for the clam and mussel dredge fisheries.

The Council then developed a Clam Dredge Framework to provide longer-term exemptions because the Great South Channel HMA contains important surf clam fishing grounds. The Council worked to balance conservation and industry needs by: (1) identifying areas that provided suitable bottom for clam fishing; while (2) continuing to minimize adverse fishing impacts on habitat to the extent practical.

Here is a brief outline of the history of the Great South Channel HMA and Clam Dredge Framework.

According to the clam industry, fishing only within the...
three approved exemption areas is not economically viable. The industry has asked the Secretary of Commerce to take emergency action to provide additional access to surfclam bottom in the Great South Channel HMA. The request itself and additional correspondence can be found here.

The Council discussed the industry’s request, as well as research being conducted within the HMA by Coonamessett Farm Foundation under an exempted fishing permit (EFP) that was issued in 2020 by the NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO). The EFP was based on the research plan developed by the Council for the HMA. The work was conducted within a subset of the Rose and Crown Research Area (see map on previous page). Several industry members provided public comment during the February webinar meeting and asked the Council to grant greater access to the area by supporting the request for emergency action or addressing the situation through another vehicle.

As a first step, the Council voted to charge the Habitat Committee, supported by the Habitat Plan Development Team, with reviewing the results of Coonamessett Farm Foundation’s report on the clam dredge mapping study in the Rose and Crown area.

The Council said the purpose of the review “is to ascertain the utility of this study for management of fishing gear impacts within the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area.” The Council added, “This assessment could be used to support NOAA Fisheries consideration of an extension for this EFP or approval of similar EFPs.”

The Council agreed to submit comments to NOAA on the five-year review of the Hudson Canyon National Marine Sanctuary nomination. NOAA is not proposing to designate the area as a sanctuary. The agency is only collecting comments on whether the area should remain on the nomination list. The red-hashed line in the map above outlines the area previously nominated. The black box is the New York Bight Scallop Closure Area that’s proposed under Scallop Framework 34.