New England Fishery Management Council

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Monkfish: Council Takes Final Action on Fishing Year 2023-2025 Specifications/Measures; Revises Research Set-Aside Priorities

The New England Fishery Management Council voted on a package of measures during its January 2023 meeting that set the stage for how the monkfish fishery will operate during the 2023-2025 fishing years.

The measures were developed through Framework Adjustment 13 to the Monkfish Fishery Management Plan and include the following:

- Acceptable biological catches (ABCs) and other specifications for both the Northern and Southern Monkfish Fishery Management Areas (see map on page 2);
- Days-at-sea allocations and a days-at-sea usage cap for both the northern and southern areas; and
- A 12" minimum mesh size requirement for monkfish gillnets with implementation delayed until 2026.

The monkfish fishery is managed jointly between the New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Councils. The New England Council has the administrative lead, but joint management means both Councils must vote on new measures before an action can be submitted to NOAA Fisheries for review, approval, and implementation. The Mid-Atlantic Council will discuss and vote on Framework 13 on February 7, 2023.

The New England Council also revised its 2023-2024 priorities for the Monkfish Research Set-Aside (RSA) Program during the January meeting in Portsmouth, NH.

Monkfish captured during a Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) research trip in Closed Area II on Georges Bank in October 2022. – VIMS photo

How We Got Here

The New England Council was scheduled to take final action on Framework 13 during its December 2022 meeting. However, the Council voiced concern during that meeting about the method used during the last three assessments to determine stock status.

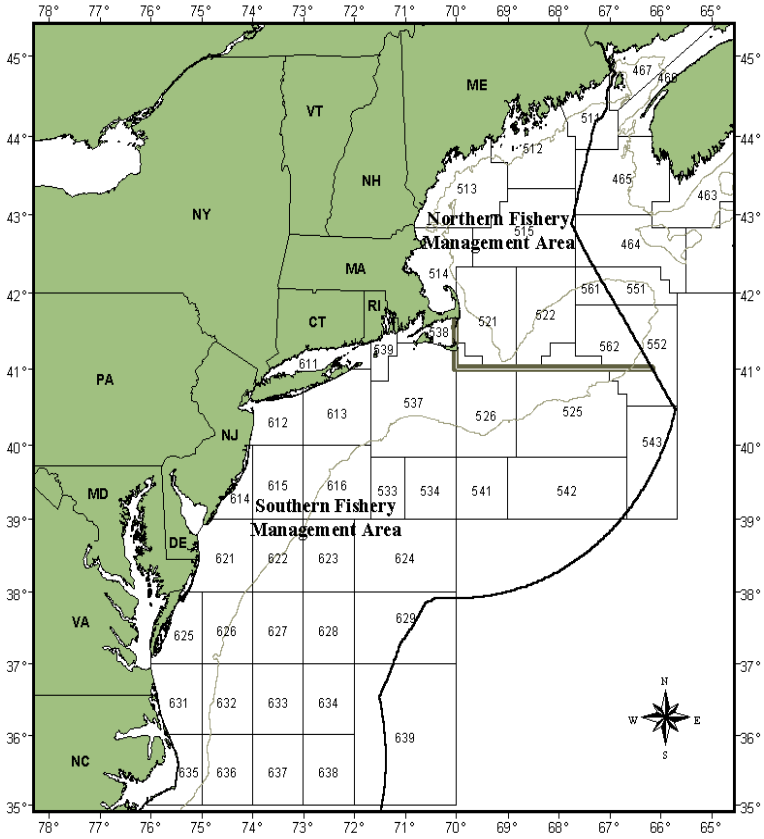
The method, known as Ismooth, applies a federal trawl survey multiplier to the latest three-year average catch from the fishery

to develop new catch advice. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) used this peer reviewed method during an October 2022 meeting to develop acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendations for fishing years 2023-2025 for monkfish.

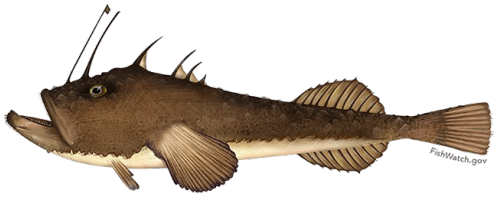
The Council uses the SSC's ABC recommendations as the starting point for setting total allowable landings for this fishery. Consistent with the assessment results, the SSC's October ABC recommendations would have led to a potential reduction in landings of 11% in the north and 27% in the south relative to fishing year 2021 landings.

Council members raised concerns about the Ismooth approach, noting that: (1) the trawl survey may not be catching monkfish consistently; and (2) monkfish landings have been low recently due to the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of markets, high trip costs, low fish prices, and other factors.

Northern and Southern Monkfish Fishery Management Areas



The Northern and Southern Monkfish Fishery Management Areas are managed separately. Each area has its own total allowable landings.



The Council voted in December to remand the ABC recommendations to the SSC for reconsideration "to facilitate a transition to the appropriate application of Ismooth for monkfish stocks." Instead of using the trawl survey multipliers applied to the recent 3-year catch, the Council asked the SSC to also consider the average of that approach with applying the trawl survey multiplier to the fishing year 2020-2022 ABCs, which is closer to how current ABCs were set.

The SSC met January 20, 2023 to consider the Council's request and decided to update its recommendation to accept the ABCs the Council requested. This resulted in 2023-2025 ABCs as follows for each of the three fishing years:

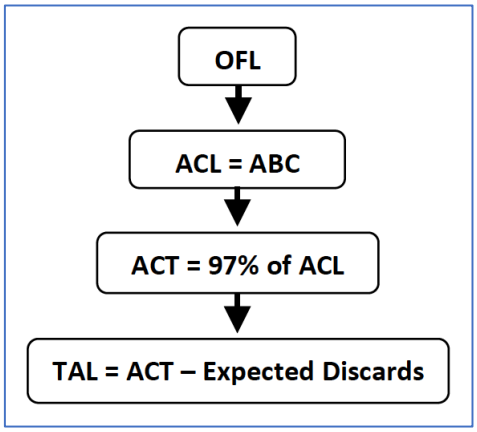
- **Northern Area: 6,224 metric tons**
- **Southern Area: 5,861 metric tons**

Next, the Council: (1) approved the revised ABCs at its January 24-26, 2023 meeting; (2) selected its preferred alternatives for

days-at-sea effort controls (see next page); and (3) voted to submit the framework to NOAA Fisheries following action by the Mid-Atlantic on the same measures.

The formula for setting specifications and TALs by area are shown in the flowchart and table below.

Flowchart for Setting Monkfish Specifications



Fishery Impact: If approved by NOAA Fisheries, the proposed fishing year 2023-2025 total allowable landings represent the following changes from fishing year 2021 landings:

- **Northern Monkfish Fishery Management Area:** a potential 2% increase over 2021 landings, which totaled 5,215 metric tons;
- **Southern Monkfish Fishery Management Area:** a potential 76% increase over 2021 landings, which totaled 1,968 metric tons.

The New England Council selected the SSC's revised recommendations because, among other reasons, the ABCs and subsequent TALs resulted in the least economic harm to the fishing industry during a transition to using the intended application of Ismooth in the management process.

Proposed Fishing Year 2023-2025 Monkfish Specifications

Monkfish Specifications	Northern Fishery Management Area	Southern Fishery Management Area
Overfishing Limit (OFL)	Undetermined	Undetermined
Acceptable Biological Catch = Annual Catch Limit (ABC = ACL)	6,224 metric tons	5,861 metric tons
Management Uncertainty (deduct 3% of ACL)	187 metric tons	176 metric tons
Annual Catch Target (ACT) = 97% of ACL	6,038 metric tons	5,685 metric tons
Expected Discards (10-year median)	729 metric tons	2,205 metric tons
Federal Total Allowable Landings (TAL) = ACT minus discards	5,309 metric tons	3,481 metric tons

~ The next Monkfish Management Track Stock Assessment is scheduled for 2025. ~

Assessment Info

During its December 2022 meeting, the Council received a presentation on the new peer reviewed stock assessment for monkfish.

The stock's status continued to be "unknown" as a result of this assessment.

- The Draft Monkfish Management Track Assessment Report is posted here.
- The peer review panel's report is included in this document.

New England Fishery Management Council

Days-at-Sea Effort Controls: Through Framework Adjustment 13, the Council is recommending separate days-at-sea allocations for the northern and southern areas. Currently, limited access monkfish permit holders are allocated 46 days-at-sea, which are reduced to 45.2 days to support the Monkfish Research Set-Aside (RSA) Program. For the next three fishing years, the Council voted to make days-at-sea allocations distinct for each area as follows:

- **Northern Area** – 35 days; and
- **Southern Area** – 37 days.

While the total adds up to 72, the Council voted to cap the number of days-at-sea that could be fished by each permit holder at 46, which would prevent overall effort from increasing.

Gillnet Mesh Size: In December, both the New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils approved a 12" minimum mesh size for monkfish gillnets. The provision will be included in Framework 13 with implementation delayed until the 2026 fishing year.

RSA Priorities: Aside from Framework 13, the Council revised its 2023-2024 monkfish research priorities in anticipation of a 2023 RSA funding opportunity. NOAA Fisheries selects RSA projects that match the Council's research priorities.


– NEFSC photo

Revised 2023-2024 Priorities for the Monkfish Research Set-Aside Program

Highest Priorities

1. Develop alternative stock assessment models; analyze existing survey indices for potential use in the Ismooth model and/or alternative assessment models.
2. Develop a standardized Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) index for the commercial directed monkfish gillnet fishery for potential use in assessments.

Other Priorities (not ranked)

3. Research on monkfish life history focusing on: (a) age and growth; (b) longevity; (c) reproduction; and (d) natural mortality.
4. Trawl and gillnet gear studies focusing on: (a) bycatch reduction, including reducing interactions with and injury/mortality to sea turtles, Atlantic sturgeon, North Atlantic right whales, humpback whales, and other protected species; and (b) size and/or species selectivity.
5. Research on pingers currently used to reduce harbor porpoise interactions with monkfish gillnet gear; investigate effectiveness of pinger use to also reduce seal interactions with monkfish gillnets.
6. Research to improve the monkfish market, including increasing domestic demand and developing new markets.
7. Research on discard mortality rates for gillnet and trawl gear (scallop dredge research was conducted previously).

- ***Questions about Framework 13? Contact Monkfish Plan Coordinator Dr. Rachel Feeney at rfeeney@nefmc.org.***
- ***Questions about monkfish RSA priorities? Contact Jenny Couture at jcouture@nefmc.org.***

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