Northern Edge of Georges Bank: Council Narrows Range of Scallop Access Concept Areas for Further Analysis

The New England Fishery Management Council has narrowed the range of options to be further analyzed in a draft framework action to potentially allow scallop fishery access to the Northern Edge of Georges Bank. This potential access would occur inside the Habitat Management Area, which is currently off limits to scallop fishing (see map).

During its April 16-18, 2024 meeting in Mystic, Connecticut, the Council reviewed extensive information related to four different “concept areas” initially developed for discussion. The Council then voted to remove Concept Area 1 and Concept Area 3 from the mix (see graphics on page 2). The Council concluded that Areas 1 and 3 were inconsistent with the goal and objectives of the framework. The background information presented to the Council included:

• Historic distribution of scallops in the Northern Edge region, scallop biomass estimates within each concept area, and the size of each area;
• Dominant types of sediment in each area — sand, pebble, cobble, and/or boulder — to define high complexity bottom;
• Estimates of habitat disturbance from scallop fishing activity based on the Fishing Effects Model and estimates of habitat recovery time under various fishing scenarios; and
• Enforceability of concept area boundaries.

The Council also: (1) considered recommendations from its Scallop and Habitat Committees, Scallop and Habitat Advisory Panels, and Enforcement Committee; and (2) took into account the Scallop and Habitat Committees’ rationale for recommending removal of Concept Areas 1 and 3.
RATIONALE FOR REMOVING CONCEPT AREA 1 AND CONCEPT AREA 3:

• The Council’s goal is to develop a scallop access program that avoids habitats important to juvenile cod and minimize adverse effects on essential fish habitat. Concept Area 1 has the highest habitat disturbance and encompasses the greatest amount of complex habitat. Concept Area 3 has the second highest habitat disturbance and overlaps substantial areas of complex habitat.

• The sliver-shaped High Complexity Area (see images below) was excluded from all options. The area south of the High Complexity Area in Concepts 1 and 3 has abundant gravel, cobble, and boulder substrates. These habitats with higher structural complexity are known to be important for juvenile cod and other managed species.

• Furthermore, removing Concept Areas 1 and 3 allows Council staff, Council members, and the public to focus efforts on options that are more consistent with the goal and objectives of this action.

The Council debated a motion to also remove Concept Area 4 due to concerns expressed by the Enforcement Committee, but the motion failed on a tie vote.

NEXT STEPS: The Council’s Scallop and Habitat Plan Development Teams, Committees, and Advisory Panels will continue to develop Concept Areas 2 and 4 as alternatives in the framework. The Council will receive an update at its June 25-27, 2024 meeting and potentially take final action at its September 24-26, 2024 meeting.

Visit the Northern Edge Webpage.