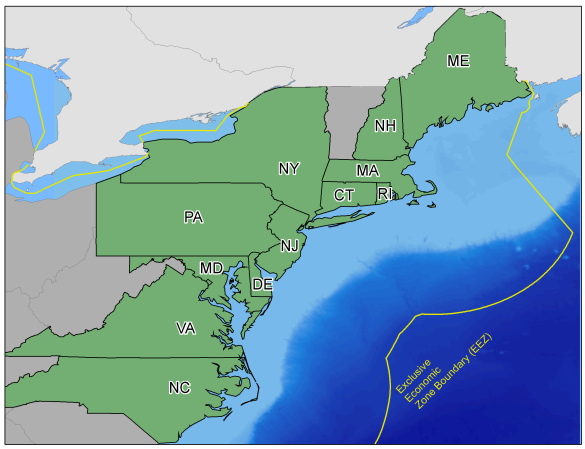
NORTHEAST REGION COORDINATING COUNCIL

Spring 2026 Meeting
May 17-28, 2026
Providence, RI



Meeting Briefing Book Table of Contents

2026 SPRING NRCC MEETING AGENDA

Hotel Providence, Providence, RI

Virtual Attendance

Or dial: (US) +1 401-594-2228 PIN: 496 333 882#

All times are approximate and subject to change

Wednesday, May 27

9:00 AM – 9:20 AM

1. Welcome, Introductions, Announcements (Dr. Hare, Ms. Deighan)
   Desired Outcomes: Set expectations, confirm agenda, and finalize dinner logistics

9:20 AM – 9:40 AM

2. Updates on Previous Action Items (All)
   Desired Outcomes: Receive updates on Spring 2025 and January 2026 Intersessional action items that are not discrete agenda topics

9:40 AM – 10:10 AM

3. Inflation Reduction Act and East Coast Coordination Group Updates (All)
   Desired Outcomes: Receive updates on East Coast Coordination Group (ECCG) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) projects relevant to NRCC

10:10 AM – 10:30 AM Morning Break

10:30 AM – 11:00 AM

4. Vessel Baselines (Dr. Moore, Dr. O'Keefe)
   Desired Outcomes: Develop a shared understanding about the challenges from the current vessel baseline restrictions and receive a progress update from the Councils on potential actions

11:00 AM – 12:00 PM

5. National Risk-Value Matrix Process (Ms. Kelly)
   Desired Outcomes: Receive an update on the direction of the national risk-value matrix effort and discuss implications for the Greater Atlantic Region

12:00 PM – 1:15 PM Lunch (individually)

1:15 PM – 1:45 PM

6. Reducing Management Workloads (Dr. O'Keefe, Dr. Moore)
   Desired Outcomes: Receive an update from the Councils on potential changes to reduce overall management workloads by dropping stocks from management, moving stocks to ecosystem component species, and/or taking a lighter approach to management for specific stocks

1:45 PM – 2:05 PM

7. Management Flexibility Actions (Dr. O'Keefe, Dr. Moore)
   Desired Outcomes: Receive a progress update from the Councils on actions to increase management flexibility

2:05 PM – 2:35 PM

8. Deregulatory Fishery Management Actions and E.O. Responses (Dr. O'Keefe, Dr. Moore)
   Desired Outcomes: Receive a progress update from the Councils on deregulatory management actions and Council actions responsive to recent executive orders (E.O.)

2:35 PM – 3:05 PM

9. NEFMC Strategic Plan Initiative (Dr. O'Keefe)
   Desired Outcomes: Receive an overview of the New England Fishery Management Council's (NEFMC) process to develop its Holistic Strategic Plan, the current draft Strategic Plan, and the next steps to develop the Implementation Plan

3:05 PM – 3:25 PM Afternoon Break

3:25 PM – 3:55 PM

10. Recreational Data Program Changes (Mr. Foster, Mr. Sartwell)
    Desired Outcomes: Develop a shared understanding of the changes being implemented to national recreational data programs, the expected timelines for those changes, and the implications of those timelines for the Greater Atlantic Region

3:55 PM – 4:10 PM

11. RDM Updates (Dr. Hare)
    Desired Outcomes: Recognizing that this tool is transitioning from development to operations, discuss ways to develop an operational governance structure.

4:10 PM – 4:40 PM

12. 2027 Assessment Schedule (Dr. Simpkins)

Desired Outcomes: Review and confirm the 2027 assessment schedule

4:40 PM – 5:00 PM

13. End of Day 1 Housekeeping (Ms. Deighan, Dr. Hare)

Desired Outcomes: Confirm the Day 1 decisions and action items; adjust the Day 2 agenda as needed

5:00 PM Recess Day 1

6:30 PM Dinner, TBD

Additional information to follow.

Thursday, May 28

9:00 AM – 9:15 AM

14. Housekeeping (Dr. Hare, Ms. Deighan)
    Desired Outcomes: Set Day 2 expectations; address any changes or updates from Day 1

9:15 AM – 9:45 AM

15. PBSP State Workshop (Mr. Brown)
    Desired Outcomes: Receive an update on the outcomes from the Port Biological Sampling Program's (PBSP) state workshop; identify future opportunities for cooperation as appropriate

9:45 AM – 10:15 AM

16. NEFOP/PBSP Merger (Ms. McArdle, Ms. Rossi)
    Desired Outcomes: Receive an update on the Northeast Fisheries Observer Program (NEFOP) and PBSP merger and its benefits to date

10:15 AM – 10:45 AM Morning Break (Check out by 12 PM)

10:45 AM – 12:00 PM

17. Recommendations for Developing a 5-year Assessment Schedule (Dr. Simpkins)
    Desired Outcomes: Agree to a general process and timeline to return to 5-year assessment planning

12:00 PM – 1:00 PM Lunch (individually)

1:00 PM – 1:30 PM

18. Research Track Recommendations (Dr. Simpkins)
    Desired Outcomes: Agree to a general process and timeline to unpause research track assessments

1:30 PM – 1:45 PM

19. Peer Reviewer Solicitation Process (Dr. Simpkins)
    Desired Outcomes: TBD based on Deputies progress on this topic

1:45 PM – 2:30 PM

20. Stakeholder Input in Assessments (Dr. Simpkins)
    Desired Outcomes: Receive an update on the implementation of the stakeholder input process and collect feedback on how the process is going; Discuss plans for the "closing-the-loop" phase of the stakeholder input process

2:30 PM – 2:50 PM Afternoon Break

2:50 PM – 3:20 PM

21. Transitioning from ASAP to WHAM (Dr. Simpkins)
    Desired Outcomes: Decide whether stocks may transition from ASAP to WHAM during management track assessments

3:20 PM – 3:50 PM

22. Review Action Items and Decisions (Ms. Deighan, Dr. Hare)
    Desired Outcomes: Confirm decisions made during the meeting and agree on the action items

3:50 PM Adjourn Meeting

Color code key:
ASMFC AWG
GARFO MAFMC
NEFMC NEFSC
NRCC

August 2025 Intersessional NRCC Meeting: Decisions and Action Items

August 20, 2025 (Virtual)

Decisions:

1. Discuss assessment schedules for 2027 and beyond at the November 2025 NRCC meeting.
2. Make 5-year projections a term of reference for 2026 assessments and beyond.
3. Set the 2026 assessment schedule, as proposed by the AWG.
4. Discuss a possible change to the 2026 assessment review scheduling at the November 2025 NRCC meeting to avoid conflicts with NAFO and NEFMC meetings.
5. Discuss the proposed assessment process simplification, including any new suggestions from the AWG, at the November 2025 NRCC meeting.

Action Items:

1. NRCC agreed to revisit the topic of the 2027 and beyond assessment schedule at the November 2025 NRCC Meeting.
   Lead: **GARFO**
   Appointees needed: Mr. Grant, Ms. Deighan
   Next step(s): Develop draft agenda.
   Due date(s): November NRCC Meeting

2. Make 5-year projections a term of reference (TOR) for 2026 assessments.
   Lead: **AWG**
   Appointees needed: Dr. Simpkins
   Next step(s): Add to TOR.
   Due date(s): 2026

The MAFMC will host the fall 2025 NRCC meeting, and NEFSC will host the spring 2026 meeting:

Fall: November 5-6, 2025; The Westin Hotel; Annapolis, MD.
Spring: May 2026; Date and location TBD. NEFSC to host.

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NEFMC NEFSC
NRCC

2026 Winter Intersessional NRCC Meeting: Decisions and Action Items

January 13, 2026 (Webinar)

Decisions:

1. Refer to the matrix in the Framework for Narrowing the Scope of NMFS Management and Science as the "risk-value matrix."
2. Tentatively approve the 2027 stock assessment schedule as proposed by the AWG, and plan to consider additions to the schedule at the May 2026 NRCC meeting.
3. Accept the AWG's proposed 2026 schedule for stock assessment meetings that avoid scheduling conflicts.
4. Continue to pause the activities of the Assessment Oversight Panel and Research Track Steering Committee through 2026, which will simplify the stock assessment process.
5. As part of the stock assessment simplification discussion, revisit the discussion of transitioning from ASAP to WHAM at the May 2026 NRCC meeting.

Action Items:

1. Item: NRCC agreed to identify a regional working group in support of the Framework for Narrowing the Scope of NMFS Management and Science and schedule an intersessional meeting to approve membership and next steps for the Working Group.
   Lead: **GARFO**, **NRCC**
   Appointees needed: Ms. Deighan, Dr. Trudeau, NRCC Principals
   Next step(s): Ms. Deighan and Dr. Trudeau schedule an intersessional NRCC meeting. NRCC principals to consider appropriate representation on the regional working group.
   Due date(s): February 2026

2. Item: NRCC agreed to discuss a return to a five-year stock assessment planning cycle at the May 2026 NRCC meeting.
   Lead: **AWG**
   Appointees needed: Dr. Simpkins
   Next step(s): Develop a proposal for a return to a 5-year planning cycle for NRCC discussion.
   Due date(s): May 2026 NRCC meeting

3. Item: NRCC agreed to revisit the 2027 stock assessment schedule at the May 2026 NRCC meeting.
   Lead: **NEFMC**, **AWG**
   Appointees needed: NEFMC members and staff, Dr. Simpkins
   Next step(s): Identify candidate stocks for consideration (NEFMC). Assess feasibility of adding stocks and prepare materials for NRCC discussion (AWG).
   Due date(s): May 2026 NRCC meeting

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NEFMC NEFSC
NRCC

4. Item: NRCC tasked AWG with preparing a proposal on the optimization of the assessment workload with consideration of stock assessment priorities, research track planning, stakeholder engagement, and the transition from ASAP to WHAM for NRCC discussion at the May 2026 NRCC meeting.
   Lead: **AWG**
   Appointees needed: Dr. Simpkins
   Next step(s): AWG prepares a proposal, with consideration of the interconnectedness of these topics, for NRCC consideration.
   Due date(s): May 2026 NRCC meeting

The **NEFSC** will host the spring and fall 2026 NRCC meetings:

Spring: May 27-28 2026; Location TBD. The meeting will be two full days.

Fall: November 2026; Date and location TBD. NEFSC to propose dates and GARFO to send poll with the goal of setting a date prior to the May 2026 meeting.

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NEFMC NEFSC
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Spring 2025 NRCC Meeting: Decisions and Action Items

May 21-22, 2025 (Annapolis, MD)

Decisions:

1. Hold a summer intersessional meeting to discuss the 2026 assessment schedule by the end of August at the latest because the Councils need the schedule set in time for September/October meetings.
2. NRCC agreed on updates to the Assessment Process Document:
    a. To "strongly encourage," but not require, the management track panel lead to attend the preceding Assessment Oversight Panel;
    b. To include "short-term" and not "long-term" projections under Research Track Term of Reference 6 (without specifically defining "short-term");
    c. To update Research Track Term of Reference 5 to read: "*Update or redefine Biological Reference Points (BRPs; point estimates or proxies for B_{MSY}, $B_{THRESHOLD}$, F_{MSY} and MSY reference points) and provide estimates of those criteria and their uncertainty, along with a description of the sources of uncertainty. If analytic model-based estimates are unavailable, consider recommending alternative measurable proxies for reference points. For illustrative purposes, where feasible and appropriate, compute the ratios of the RT assessment's terminal year stock size and fishing mortality to existing, and any redefined, BRPs.*"
3. Receive an update on DNF work at the fall 2025 NRCC meeting.
4. Receive an update on PBSP and NEFOP contract merger at the fall 2025 meeting.
5. Receive an update on the state-federal sampling workshop at the fall 2025 meeting.
6. Receive an update on stakeholder engagement in the stock assessment process at the fall 2025 NRCC meeting.
7. Revisit council operating agreements at the spring 2026 NRCC meeting.

Action Items:

1. Development of a revised draft 2026 assessment schedule and proposed assessment process changes, tradeoffs, and flexibilities. The AWG will prioritize the 2026 assessment schedule, to be provided by the summer intersessional. The AWG will start to revise the future years' schedule, with a strawman provided for the summer intersessional and/or the fall meeting. AWG will also consider scheduling to help resolve conflicts with the NAFO meeting and the June council meetings.
    Lead: **AWG**
    Appointees needed: N/A
    Next step(s): Revise 2026 assessment schedule and share with NRCC. Revise meeting schedule.
    Due date(s): NRCC summer 2025 intersessional.

2. Compile and transmit to the NRCC the MAFMC staff's thoughts on the issues raised in the NEFMC Executive Committee's December letter to the NEFSC regarding scientific support.

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NRCC

Lead: **MAFMC staff**
Appointees needed: N/A
Next step(s): **MAFMC staff** compile information and share with NRCC.
Due date(s): NRCC summer 2025 intersessional.

3. Circulate MAFMC white paper on baselines.
   Lead: **GARFO**
   Appointees needed: N/A
   Next step(s): **GARFO** staff obtain a copy of the white paper from MAFMC and circulate to NRCC.
   Due date(s): NRCC summer 2025 intersessional.

4. Deputies meet to develop a process for soliciting additional peer reviewers.
   Lead: **ASMFC**, **MAFMC**, **NEFMC**, **NEFSC**, **GARFO**, **NRCC**
   Appointees needed: Deputies
   Next step(s): Proposed process provided to NRCC.
   Due date(s): NRCC fall 2025 meeting (but after action item 1).

5. Schedule a virtual intersessional meeting in August 2025.
   Lead: **MAFMC**
   Appointees needed: Mark and Laura
   Next step(s): Poll for dates.
   Due date(s): ASAP.

6. Request that the ECCG core team begin tracking the IRA project supporting one-stop vessel reporting for all Atlantic-permitted vessels.
   Lead: **NRCC**
   Appointees needed: Dr. Moore
   Next step(s): **NRCC Chair** contacts core team.
   Due date(s): June 16, 2025.

7. Circulate a list of species included in the Port Biological Sampling Program.
   Lead: **NEFSC**
   Appointees needed: Dr. Hare
   Next step(s): **NEFSC** provides the list to NRCC.
   Due date(s): June 16, 2025.

The MAFMC will host the fall 2025 NRCC meeting, and NEFSC will host the spring 2026 meeting:

Fall: November 5-6, 2025; Location TBD;
Spring: May 2026; Date and location TBD.

Memorandum

Date: May 11, 2026
From: Michelle Bachman, NEFMC staff, and Kiley Dancy, MAFMC staff
To: Northeast Region Coordinating Council (NRCC)
Subject: Update on Council Inflation Reduction Act Projects and East Coast Coordination Group Activities

Current IRA Project Status

General status updates for East Coast Council Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) projects are summarized below. More complete updates can be found on the Council websites (see links below). All three Councils are using project oversight teams (POTs) to guide contract work, which generally include representation from several other East Coast organizations.

- **NEFMC:** Work is underway on all 6 IRA initiatives and projects are generally on track in terms of timelines. The contractor-supported phase of Holistic Strategic Plan Development (IRA 5) has concluded as of April 2026 and Council staff and members are beginning to develop an implementation plan. Risk policy factor evaluation and acceptable biological catch control rule simulation testing under IRA 1 / IRA 3 are substantially complete and the Council will move into groundfish ABC CR management alternatives development soon. A framework for ecosystem component species evaluation (IRA 3) has been created and pilot results will be shared with the Council in June. Also under IRA 3, the Council will host a workshop for its Scientific and Statistical Committee to advance use of dynamic reference points in the region on June 1-2, 2026. Governance projects and workshop planning (IRA 4) are ongoing. Also under IRA 4, development of analytical tools to evaluate harvest portfolios, including dynamic factor analysis and species distribution model integration, will be completed this summer, and results will be shared starting in the fall. Planning and preparation for groundfish management transition stakeholder sessions (IRA 2) will begin later this year, now that Amendment 25 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP has been approved. Staff work to enhance participatory processes (IRA 6) is also under development, with website updates and training sessions planned for later this year.

  NEFMC IRA project briefs are available here.

- **MAFMC:** Work is underway on 7 of the 8 initiatives. Plans for the final initiative (Project 8: Advancing Scenario Planning Outcomes) are being refined, with an RFP tentatively planned for release in June 2026. The scope of this final project is being modified and reduced from what was included in the original proposal. This is primarily due to heavy overlap of the planned elements of this project with components of other ongoing IRA project efforts, and expected challenges completing some planned elements of this project on the necessary timeline.

The other projects continue to make good progress and remain mostly on track in terms of planned timeline. Project 2: Collaborative Strategies to Adapt Scup GRAs to Changing Ocean Conditions) is nearing completion with a final report expected in June 2026. All other projects are expected to be completed in 2027. The completion date for Project 3a: Improving Mid-Atlantic Council Governance Structures and Processes has been extended from June 2027 to December 2027 in order to account for a revised governance workshop timeline and contractor capacity constraints. A second component of Project 3, Project 3b: Addressing Outcomes of the MAFMC/GARFO program review, will be initiated in late 2026 with the intent to hire a contractor to develop some communication and documentation products for the Council.

MAFMC IRA project information and Council meeting updates are available here.

- **SAFMC:** Work has begun on 7 out of the 9 IRA initiatives. The SAFMC has updated its initiative count from 7 to 9. Project 4 was initially listed as a single project, however, it has now been developed into three phases. Phase I and II are now underway, and the RFP for Phase III is open until May 22, 2026, with an anticipated start date of late June 2026. Work has also begun on the Adaptable Permit Structure document. A meeting is planned to explore collaboration between the Council project and ongoing NOAA projects.

  Work on a couple of SAFMC IRA-funded projects is beginning to wrap up. The SAFMC Ecosystem Data Workshop was held in January and February of this year. Attendees participated in five virtual sessions during which they discussed ecosystem data availability and current use, and developed guidance for more fully integrating it into Council decision-making processes. In addition, the first of two SAFMC Governance projects, Project 1b. Ecosystem Information Review and Strategy Development, will be completed later this year with the final report presented to the Council during their September 2026 meeting.

  Project updates are prepared quarterly and provided in the briefing materials for the SAFMC meetings. These can be viewed on the Council's website at SAFMC's Resilient Fisheries webpage.

East Coast Coordination Group Updates

The East Coast Coordination Group (ECCG) is overseeing collaboration between the Councils and other ECCG organizations where needed in the execution of IRA-funded projects. East Coast Council staff IRA Coordinators continue to meet regularly to discuss their development and share updates. The primary focus of coordination efforts has been on governance related projects and workshops. Following a successful staff-to-staff workshop held in February, focus has now shifted to planning for a **broader governance workshop** to be held in February/March 2027.

This governance workshop is intended to:

1. Review information collected to date via IRA governance projects or other efforts, including documentation of existing structures and processes and stakeholder feedback collected.
2. Develop specific and practical recommendations, including an implementation plan, for improving the governance structures and processes for East Coast fisheries management, building on the input from the staff-to-staff workshop, stakeholder feedback collected via the IRA projects, and the potential action items previously identified through the East Coast Scenario Planning process.
3. Provide additional input to inform the final products and recommendations for relevant East Coast Council IRA projects.

Expected focus areas include:

- Use of and representation on Council advisory bodies, including committees, advisory panels, and other relevant technical advisory bodies.
- Improved joint or cooperative management arrangements.
- Use of Council liaisons.
- Other mechanisms to improve cross-jurisdictional coordination and enhance the responsiveness of current governance structures to changing conditions.

The ECCG will meet on **Friday, June 5, 2026** to provide further guidance on development of this governance workshop, as well as to:

- Review status updates on 2026 coordinated priorities;
- Identify 2027 coordinated priorities; and
- Review Core Team recommendations for revisions to the ECCG Potential Action Menu.

Coordinated priorities for 2027 are likely to remain largely focused on development and coordination of IRA projects and planning for any implementation needs once projects are completed.

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Daniel Salerno, *Chair* | Cate O'Keefe, PhD, *Executive Director*

Joint New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council Meetings of all Advisory Panels: Input on Vessel Baseline Restrictions Evaluation

The New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils are holding three joint webinar meetings for the Advisory Panels to provide input to help inform the Councils' ongoing evaluation of vessel baseline restrictions. These restrictions apply to most commercial limited access fisheries managed by the Councils and require that vessel replacements or upgrades must be within 10% of the length and 20% of the horsepower of the permit's baseline vessel. Some industry participants have reported challenges in acquiring suitable replacement vessels or engines that meet these specifications, particularly for smaller vessels.

The Councils are evaluating these restrictions and may consider initiating a joint management action to consider possible modifications. Input provided by advisors during these meetings will help inform Council discussions of this issue. If the Councils agree to initiate a management action, work on an action would occur in 2027 and there would be additional opportunities for Advisory Panel and public input in the future.

Date and Time	**Webinar Link**
Webinar Thursday, May 21, 2026 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM	https://nefmc-org.zoom.us/meeting/register/PmGbLGFwS2uRxaWpZ23bUw
Webinar Thursday, May 21, 2026 6:00 – 8:00 PM	https://nefmc-org.zoom.us/meeting/register/WYkJuslmRSeo94ftNEPV6g
Webinar Tuesday, May 26, 2026 2:00 – 4:00 PM	https://nefmc-org.zoom.us/meeting/register/I27AMyKCR2qSG7SC6vqPBA

Agenda: During each meeting, Council staff will provide background information on vessel baseline restrictions, vessel data, and questions for consideration. Advisors will then have an opportunity to comment. Public comments will also be allowed.

Online access: These meetings will be broadcast online via Zoom. Use the above links to register. Use VoIP with a microphone and speakers for audio. A headset is recommended. After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the webinar. For the best audio and visual experience, your Zoom desktop application must be updated prior to the meeting.

Call-in information: After registering for a meeting, the confirmation e-mail will include a call-in number. Please note that this is not a toll-free number.

Written comments: Members of the public may submit written comments directly to the New England Fishery Management Council. Written comments will be accepted **through Friday, May 29, 2026**. Comments should be addressed to: Cate O'Keefe, PhD, Executive Director, New England Fishery Management Council, 50 Water Street, Mill #2, Newburyport, MA 01950; and sent by postal mail or by email: comments@nefmc.org. Please note on your correspondence: **"Vessel Baseline Comments."**

For information about meeting materials and detailed agenda, please consult the Councils' websites at www.nefmc.org or www.mafmc.org.

These meetings will be recorded. Consistent with 16 U.S.C. 1852, a copy of the recording is available upon request.

This schedule is subject to change. If you have questions, please call the Council office.

TA #: 26-82; 26-83; 26-84
cc: all Advisors; Council Members
Notice date: April 15, 2026

MEMORANDUM

Date: March 24, 2026

To: Chris Moore, Executive Director

From: Hayden Dubniczki and Julia Beaty, staff

Subject: Update on industry requests regarding vessel baseline restrictions

Current regulations for all limited access commercial fisheries managed by the Mid-Atlantic and New England Fishery Management Councils restrict vessel replacements and upgrades to within 10 percent of the length and 20 percent of the horsepower of the permit's baseline vessel.[1] The baseline vessel is generally the vessel that was first issued the limited access permit for that fishery. The purpose of these restrictions is to limit potential increases in the harvest capacity of the fleet. However, some industry participants have reported challenges in acquiring suitable replacement vessels or engines that meet these specifications, particularly for smaller vessels.

For example, during their February 2026 meeting, the Mid-Atlantic Council discussed a request from a commercial black sea bass fisherman in Virginia for a temporary exemption from these baseline restrictions so he could transfer his permit to a larger boat, allowing him to fish more safely in the winter when black sea bass are farther offshore and he has fewer opportunities to target other species. This individual has been trying to find a new permit with a baseline that fits the larger vessel he bought in 2024 but has been unsuccessful thus far.[2]

As staff noted during the discussion at the February 2026 Council meeting, there are currently no regulatory pathways to waive baseline restrictions for individual vessels aside from Exempted Fishing Permits, which are time-limited and generally issued for activities in support of fisheries-related research. The only immediate potential solution for a situation like this is for the affected individual to obtain a new permit with a baseline that fits the intended vessel. Given these fisheries are limited access, this requires finding a permit that is already available for sale or that the current permit holder is willing to give up. Permit brokers can assist with this for a fee. The Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) can also provide some assistance, but it is largely the responsibility of the prospective buyer to find the relevant permit.

Federal vessel permit information, including the baseline assigned to each permit, is public information and can be provided by GARFO. In this specific instance, GARFO staff provided the individual with a customized list of black sea bass permits with baselines that fit the intended vessel, as well as contact information for the current permit holders. This included active permits

[1] For example, see 50 CFR 648.4(a)(1)(i)(E) and 50 CFR 648.4(a)(1)(i)(F).
[2] A comment letter was provided with the briefing materials. This individual also provided additional context during the session on other business at the end of the February 2026 Council meeting.

and inactive permits in “confirmation of permit history,” as well as vessels in a “renew or lose” status because they are eligible to renew their permits for the year but have not yet done so. GARFO can assist with the application process for transferring permits; however, it is up to the prospective buyer to contact other permit holders to determine if anyone is willing to give up their permits.

Based on discussions between Council staff and GARFO, obtaining a new permit is the only potential immediate relief for permit holders who are constrained by their current vessel baselines. However, the Mid-Atlantic and New England Councils may consider revising the vessel baseline restrictions in the future through a management action such as a Fishery Management Plan Amendment. This would likely take multiple years to develop and analyze management alternatives, collect public input, prepare the necessary documentation, and complete the federal rule making process to implement any desired changes. Based on taskings from both Councils, staff are working with GARFO staff on an evaluation of the current vessel baseline restrictions. The Councils are tentatively scheduled to review this evaluation and consider initiating a joint management action at their respective fall meetings (i.e., the New England Council’s September meeting and the Mid-Atlantic Council’s October meeting).

Management Flexibility Actions

Omnibus Management Flexibility Amendment:
https://www.nefmc.org/library/omnibus-management-flexibility-amendment

- This site has the New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils' final submission document and some background information about the action

New England Fishery Management Council
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Daniel Salerno, *Chair* | Cate O'Keefe, PhD, *Executive Director*

April 23, 2026

Mr. Eugenio Piñeiro-Soler
Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries
U.S. Department of Commerce
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dear Mr. Piñeiro-Soler:

Please accept this letter as the New England Fishery Management Council's (Council) updated response to your request related to Executive Order 14276 *Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness* signed by the President on April 17, 2025. The Council did not recommend changes to their September 30, 2025 identified activities and workplan for Executive Order 14276. The Council considered public comments submitted during the December 2025 open comment period, and they confirmed that no changes are necessary.

The Council appreciates this opportunity to highlight progress on previously identified activities and emphasize ongoing efforts in support of Executive Order 14276. Listed below are the identified activities from the Council's September 30, 2025 workplan with updated status and ongoing commitments.

New England Fishery Management Council Recommendations for Executive Order 14276

1. Council Actions in the NOAA Fisheries Rulemaking Process

1.1. Northeast Multispecies Framework Adjustment 69

- Framework Adjustment 69 was implemented via rulemaking on March 9, 2026.

1.2. Atlantic Herring 2025-2027 Specifications

- Specifications for Atlantic Herring Fishing Years 2025-2027 were implemented via rulemaking on December 11, 2025.

2. Council Actions Under Development

2.1. Omnibus Management Flexibility Amendment

- The Council prepared a final submission of the Omnibus Management Flexibility Amendment, which is currently under review by NMFS for rulemaking.

2.2. Actions to Set Specifications for Monkfish and Skates

- Proposed rules for Skate Specifications for Fishing Years 2026-2028 and Monkfish Framework 17 were published on March 26, 2026 and April 23, 2026, respectively.

2.3. Spiny Dogfish Framework Adjustment for Accountability Measures and Specifications

- Jointly with the Mid-Atlantic, the Councils approved the Spiny Dogfish Framework to adjust Accountability Measures in December 2025, which is currently being drafted for submission to NMFS.

2.4. Sea Scallop Strategic Plan
- The Council approved the Sea Scallop Strategic Plan in December 2025 and is incorporating high priority items in the development of Scallop Framework 42 in 2026.

2.5. Ecosystem Components Evaluation
- The Council is developing a framework to evaluate criteria for identifying Ecosystem Component species and stocks, which will be presented for approval by the Council in June 2026.

2.6. Modernizing Approaches to Governance
- The Council approved a Holistic Strategic Plan in April 2026 and is developing an Implementation Plan to increase organizational and operational performance, in coordination with east coast partner organizations, improve efficiency and effectiveness of management approaches to provide timelier actions, increase public accessibility of information, and reduce burdens on domestic fishing.

3. Proposed Council Activities for Executive Order 14276

3.1. Modifications to Vessel Baseline Restrictions
- In collaboration with the Mid-Atlantic Council and Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO), the Council is participating in a Working Group to evaluate existing vessel baseline restrictions. A series of meetings for all Advisory Panel members in the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions are scheduled for May 2026, and the evaluation report will be considered by the Council in September 2026 to determine the types of actions needed to reduce vessel baseline constraints.

3.2. Atlantic Herring Slippage Measures
- The Council proposed an evaluation of existing herring slippage measures with potential follow-on actions in 2027.

3.3. Monkfish Management Modifications
- The Council is conducting five "Listening Sessions" in May 2026 to solicit ideas for improvements to the monkfish and skate fisheries. Results from the Listening Sessions will inform priority actions in 2027.

3.4. Revisions to Reactive Accountability Measures
- The Council initiated an assessment of Accountability Measures (AMs) across all Fishery Management Plans and proposed prioritizing action(s) to revise AMs in 2027.

3.5. Fishery Management Plan Revisions
- The Council initiated a review of outdated and irrelevant regulations across Fishery Management Plans and prioritized removal of regulations via upcoming management actions.

3.6. Dogfish Gillnet Exemption Area Modifications
- The Council prioritized an evaluation of existing Northeast Multispecies Exemption Areas for holistic revisions to be conducted in 2027.

4. Non-Council Activities for Executive Order 14276

The Council reemphasized support for the following activities:

4.1. Seafood Marketing and Promotion
4.2. Fisheries Monitoring and Scientific Programs
4.3. Recreational Bioeconomic Model
4.4. Changing Environment and Fisheries Initiative
4.5. Categorical Exclusions under the National Environmental Policy Act

Finally, in response to the December 2025 additional public comments, the Council highlighted ongoing commitment to the following topics:

- Use of fishery-dependent data and cooperative research
    - The Council has continually supported the use of fishery-dependent data in management and science products, including stock assessments. The Council will foster ongoing collaboration with regional and national NOAA partners, research organizations, and academic institutions to codevelop and conduct research with the fishing industry.

- Regulation reform
    - The Council's workplan for Executive Order 14276 includes implementation of the Omnibus Management Flexibility Amendment, evaluation of modifications to vessel baseline restrictions, revisions to fishery management plans to minimize redundancy, revisions to AMs, and application of criteria to define Ecosystem Components. Collectively, these activities align with the objectives of Executive Order 14276 and public input related to reducing regulatory burdens.
- Use of technology
    - The Council is exploring the use of AI and automation, as well as new technology to enhance user accessibility and decision-making processes. As these initiatives progress, the Council will ensure alignment with the objectives of Executive Order 14276.

The Council appreciates the opportunity to confirm our Executive Order 14276 workplan and looks forward to receiving updates from NOAA Fisheries as available. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Cate O'Keefe
Executive Director

CC: Mr. Sam Rauch, Ms. Kelly Denit, Mr. Michael Pentony, Dr. Jon Hare, NOAA Fisheries

NEFMC Strategic Plan Initiative

April 2026 NEFMC Holistic Strategic Plan Initiative:
https://www.nefmc.org/library/april-2026-holistic-strategic-plan-initiative

- The linked website includes the April Council meeting materials: presentation, draft strategic plan, and project report.

#12b

New England Fishery Management Council

2026-2036 HOLISTIC STRATEGIC PLAN

Photo Sources: Green Finn Studio and Adobe Stock Images.

A Message from the Executive Committee

The New England Fishery Management Council has long stood at the center of a dynamic and often challenging balance: sustaining abundant fish populations while supporting the communities, businesses, and traditions that depend on them. For nearly five decades, the Council process has brought fishermen, scientists, managers, and the public together to make difficult decisions in pursuit of sustainable fisheries and resilient coastal economies.

This strategic plan reflects our commitment to strengthening that process for the future. The fisheries we manage today are affected by rapidly changing ecological, economic, and social conditions. Environmental change, evolving scientific understanding, technological advances, and shifting market dynamics are reshaping the conditions under which fisheries operate and are managed. At the same time, the expectations placed on fisheries management continue to grow, requiring greater transparency, collaboration, and responsiveness.

A strategic plan allows the Council to step back from the immediate demands of the regulatory process and focus on the broader direction of the organization. It provides a framework for improving how we conduct our work, engage with stakeholders, integrate science into decision-making, and coordinate with our federal, state, and regional partners.

Central to this effort is recognizing that effective fisheries management is not accomplished by the Council alone. It depends on the knowledge and experience of the fishing industry, the insights of scientists, the perspectives of communities, and the partnership of management agencies. Strengthening those relationships and ensuring that the Council process remains accessible, credible, and grounded in the best available science will be essential to our success.

This strategic plan is intended to guide the Council over the coming decade as we continue to refine our management approaches, improve our organizational effectiveness, and prepare for the challenges ahead. It is not only a roadmap for the Council as an institution, but also a commitment to the people and ecosystems of New England that our work ultimately serves.

By setting clear priorities and reinforcing our shared goals, we can ensure that the New England Fishery Management Council remains a strong and effective steward of the region’s marine resources for generations to come.

New England Fishery Management Council

2026-2036 HOLISTIC STRATEGIC PLAN

Working Draft - April 1, 2026

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Introduction

Background

The New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC, or the Council) is one of eight regional councils established by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) of 1976. The Council is mandated to conserve and manage fishery resources from three to 200 nautical miles off the coasts of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut (i.e., the United States Exclusive Economic Zone) (Figure 1). The Council's management authority extends to the Gulf of Maine, Georges Bank, and Southern New England, encompassing some of the nation's most iconic and economically significant marine fishery resources such as cod, haddock, flounder, Atlantic sea scallops, and Atlantic herring (Management Plans - NEFMC).

As a national leader in marine resource management, the Council develops recommendations through a collaborative process designed to ensure the long-term productivity of 28 marine species, including 41 stocks and one anadromous species, through nine fishery management plans (FMPs), while simultaneously supporting the commercial, recreational, and economic interests of New England's fishing communities. In supporting these interests, the Council works to ensure the region's fishing industry can achieve Optimum Yield while preventing overfishing and rebuilding overfished stocks. The Council faces growing challenges in the form of ecological, economic, and social variability, which make it more difficult for the Council to meet its statutory requirements.

The Council operationalizes its collaborative management framework through a network of key regional and federal partners, working in close coordination with its member states (Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut), NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) and Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC), as well as the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC). Regionally, NEFMC staff collaborate with the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC) to jointly manage shared stocks of monkfish and spiny dogfish. This coordination extends to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) for highly migratory species and habitat protections that span the entire Atlantic coast. More broadly, the Council engages closely with the five other regional fishery management councils: the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC), North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC), Western Pacific Fishery Management Council (WPFMC), Gulf Fishery Management Council (GFMC), and Caribbean Fishery Management Council (CFMC). All eight regional councils participate in the Council Coordination Committee (CCC) that addresses nationwide policy challenges. Finally, the Council collaborates and engages in international management through the Transboundary Management Guidance Committee, Northwest

Atlantic Fisheries Organization, International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, and other Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) as appropriate.

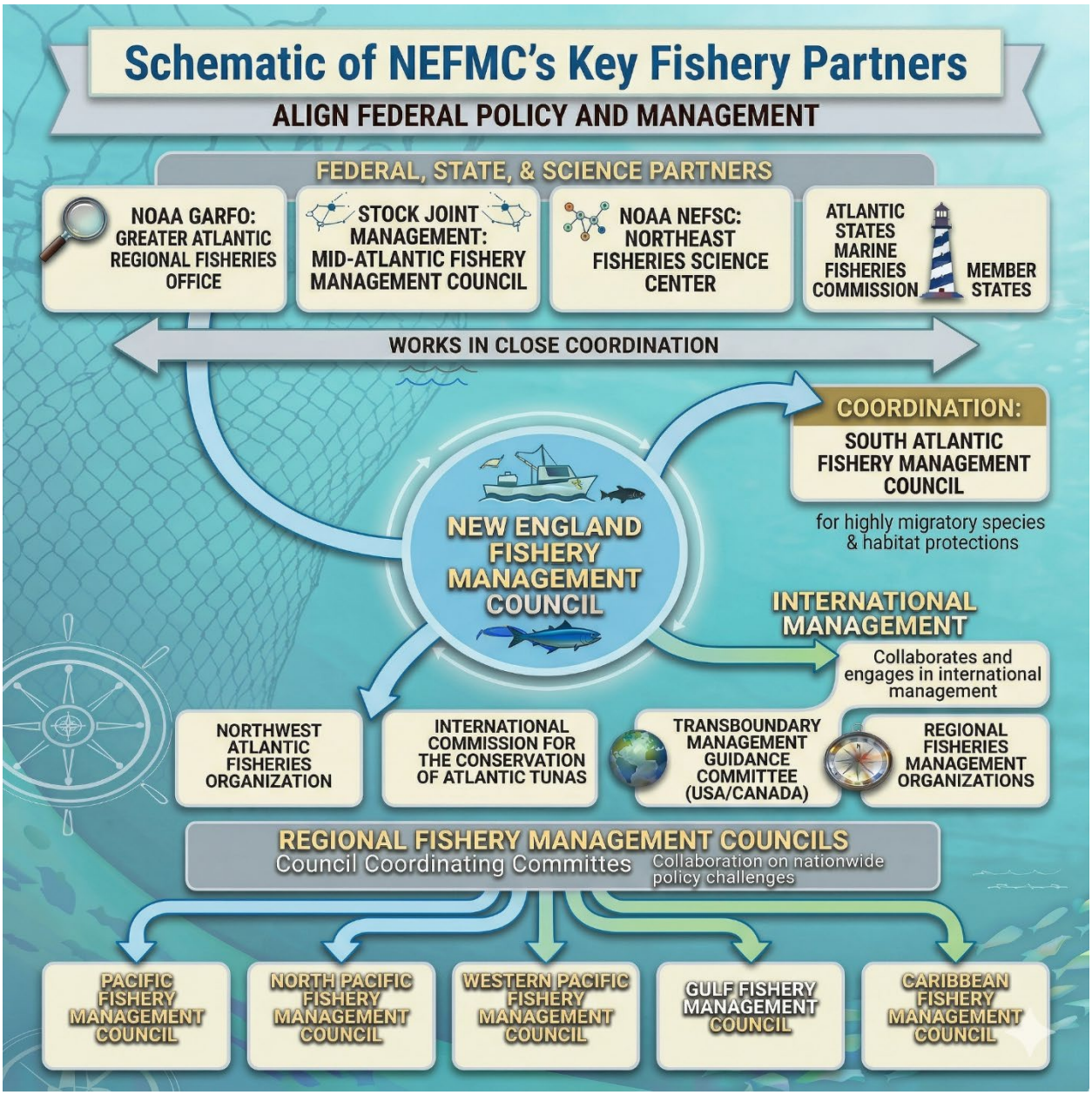

Figure 1. Key fishery partners of the NEFMC.

The Council's robust external partnerships are reinforced by its multifaceted internal structure, ensuring that management actions are grounded in the best available scientific information and that fishery stakeholders make meaningful contributions. Management actions are developed through an open, public process that integrates diverse expertise from six Oversight Committees, nine Advisory Panels (AP), ten Plan Development Teams (PDT), three Joint Committees, and the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) in an overarching, integrated approach.

Navigating a Changing Landscape

As fish stock productivity and distributions change in response to environmental conditions, and as available staffing and budgetary resources to manage fishery resources fluctuate, the Council must transition to a dynamic, adaptive, and forward-looking management framework to ensure the long-term resilience of New England's fishing industries and economy. While the Council continues to uphold its statutory mandates, implementing resilient and responsive management actions requires the cultivation of a deep culture of shared stewardship among the fishing industry, scientific community, and resource managers.

The Council acknowledges an urgent need to rebuild trust among scientists, managers, and industry partners to increase its management effectiveness. Therefore, the Council developed a holistic strategic plan to reaffirm its mission and establish an aspirational vision for the future. Through this strategic plan, the Council intends to modernize its operations to become a more agile, data-driven organization that can react quickly to ecological and fisheries changes. The strategic plan strives to ensure that every management decision is supported by relevant, transparent information that supports the increased success and profitability of New England fishing fleets. The plan will address ways to streamline internal processes and improve partner and stakeholder engagement.

Through its strategic plan, the Council will continue to foster partnerships and implement approaches to support the importance of New England's fisheries to the regional economy. Over the next ten years, the Council will guide the region toward a more sustainable and adaptive economy by evolving its processes to meet the complexities of shifting environmental conditions and management resources.

The Foundation

Institutional Stability, Constraints, and Assumptions

The development of this strategic plan includes several assumptions and expected conditions for the next ten years. Specifically, the MSA is expected to remain substantially unchanged, and existing mandates will continue to guide us. We expect our existing partnerships with external agencies (e.g., federal, state, and interstate commissions) and collaborators to continue. We assume that financial resources, staffing levels, and overall organizational capacity will not increase in the foreseeable future. We anticipate a reduction in the frequency of future stock assessments and that the current management structure, including managed species and their respective FMPs, may be subject to reorganization. Finally, we acknowledge that achieving objectives will require alternative scientific and management strategies.

The Council's Vision and Mission

Two vision statements were created to describe an aspirational state for both the Council and New England Fisheries. The Council's Mission Statement is derived directly from the text of the MSA under Sections 3, 302, and 303(a); see Appendix A for details of the supporting language used for the Council's Mission Statement.

Our Vision for the Council

"*We are a global leader in fisheries management and directly engage a broad array of stakeholders to provide a trusted, predictable, and well understood process that leads to successful and sustainable fisheries by applying flexible and efficient tools to address emerging and dynamic conditions.*"

Our Vision for New England Fisheries

"*We have enduring and abundant fishery resources that support:*

a) adaptive, profitable, and globally competitive fishing industries;
b) thriving recreational opportunities; and
c) robust fishing communities."

Our Mission

"*The New England Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils established by federal legislation in 1976, is charged with conserving and managing fishery resources from three to 200 miles off the coasts of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut to prevent overfishing and rebuild overfished stocks, and to protect, restore, and promote the long-term health and stability of the fisheries*."

The Future

The strategic plan is built upon the Council's commitment to a science-driven, participatory management system. While the Council operates in a complex and rapidly evolving marine environment, the following Principles, Goals, Objectives, and Strategies will guide the Council's future operations and actions. We provide four specific goals with strategies to meet them.

Guiding Principles

These guiding principles represent our shared values and serve to demonstrate how we work to execute and achieve the goals and objectives of this strategic plan.

1. **Stewardship**: We are committed to an integrated strategy that balances environmental, economic, and social factors to operationalize ecosystem approaches to fisheries management.

2. **Trust**: We work to build and maintain stakeholder confidence through transparency, actionable feedback loops, and clear and respectful communication.

3. **Organizational Excellence**: We uphold the highest standards of analytical rigor and intentional collaboration, striving for excellence by streamlining workflows and supporting the workforce.

4. **Adaptability**: We proactively prepare for a dynamic future by moving from reactive decision-making to a system that anticipates and responds to resource conditions in real-time.

5. **Representative**: We ensure our actions support the long-term viability of the entire New England fleet, providing attention and opportunity across all managed species and communities.

Goals, Objectives, and Strategies

Goal 1 - Build flexibility and adaptability into Fishery Management Plans and streamline the process of developing management measures.

Description:
The Council will refine its management focus and respond to fishery management needs with greater agility by identifying, prioritizing, and completing initiatives more efficiently and effectively. The Council will expand capacity for Council members, staff, and partners by aligning intended outcomes with requested analyses, improving process efficiency, and reducing redundancy across operations.

Objectives:

- Optimize Council member, staff, and partner time for the development of actions.
- Refine information streams to reduce duplication, minimize preparation time, and streamline products, including the use of artificial intelligence and automation.
- Support the implementation of actions across all plans by the start of the fishing year.
- Increase the ability to adjust management measures in a timely manner.

Strategies:

Strategy 1: Revise the annual priority setting process	**Strategy 2: Reduce redundancy in information sharing throughout action development**	**Strategy 3: Set specifications through streamlined processes, decoupled from other management measures**	**Strategy 4: Focus analyses and documentation on identified action objectives**
Actions:	Actions:	Actions:	Actions:
Identify objectives to inform priority activities.	Enhance joint meeting opportunities among Plan Development Teams (PDT), Advisory Panels (AP), and the Committees (CTE).	Ensure timely development, review, and implementation of annual catch limits.	Optimize the range of alternatives considered for action.
Build consensus to prioritize top management needs.	Encourage participation in stock assessment and SSC meetings.	Consider revising specifications through in-season adjustment or streamlined analyses.	Prepare meeting documents in accordance with required analyses (e.g., NEPA or other statutory requirements).
Recommend priority activities within realistic capacity parameters, including all partners.	Focus meeting presentations and materials to target audiences and bundle routine items.	Allow flexible timelines for the development of management improvement actions.	Use AI/automation tools where applicable to generate summaries for user accessibility.

Goal 2 - Grow and strengthen partnerships between science, management, and fishing communities.

Description:
The Council will foster and improve engagement among scientists, managers, fishermen, and other partners to enhance participatory processes, build and maintain trust, and ensure clear, timely, and relevant input for decision-making. Transparent communication of scientific information, coupled with clearly defined management objectives and targeted stakeholder input, will support an environment that reduces system shocks and enables respectful dialogue and constructive collaboration.

Objectives:

- Increase participation from all user groups throughout the Council system and processes.
- Enhance the ability to communicate information in a professional and decision-relevant manner.
- Facilitate opportunities to improve science and management decisions by connecting all user groups.
- Ensure representative involvement in the development of science and management products.

Strategies:

Strategy 1: Develop communication tools and practices that support clear, consistent, and accessible information sharing	**Strategy 2: Increase opportunities for stakeholder input to the scientific process and outputs**	**Strategy 3: Align science priority topics with management and fishing industry objectives**
Actions:	Actions:	Actions:
Host and facilitate joint and multi-user meetings to address complex topics.	Formalize a community engagement strategy to provide input to stock assessments, survey methods, data treatments, fishery indices, etc.	Consider input from science partners when determining Council priorities.
Develop protocols for the use of technology and social media to enhance outreach.	Develop coupled engagement and retention strategies to reactivate and retain stakeholders in Council activities.	Refine the approach to updating Council Research Priorities, focusing on immediate, near-term, and long-term needs.
	Foster routine interactions between stock assessment scientists and fishermen at all stages of the assessment process.	Consider dedicated, collaborative time blocks for interorganizational discussion of FMPs, stocks, species, and regional requirements.

Goal 3 - Improve accessibility, quality, and use of data to inform decisions

Description:
The Council will optimize the suite of presented information and data streams to support transparent and adaptive management approaches. Adopting a dynamic approach to incorporate emerging data from fishery-dependent and independent sources will ensure the continued coproduction of fisheries information and collective ownership of management outcomes.

Objectives:

- Improve user understanding of data streams (i.e., collection methods, analysis tools, interpretation of results).
- Enhance opportunities to provide input about data needs to external partners.
- Balance consideration of quantitative and qualitative data to support management recommendations, including socioeconomic information.
- Apply the Council's Risk Policy in specification-setting.
- Enhance application of emergent data to inform management recommendations.
- Conduct routine review of reports and analytical documents to ensure summary sections capture key concepts, clear actions/outcomes, and readability for all.

Strategies:

Strategy 1: Provide and encourage opportunities for all to teach/learn about data sources, treatments, analyses, interpretations, and applications	**Strategy 2: Expand collaborative pathways for the application of fishery-dependent data**	**Strategy 3: Implement a Risk Policy that considers biological, environmental, and socioeconomic factors**	**Strategy 4: Streamline approaches to incorporate emergent information in a timely manner**
Actions:	Actions:	Actions:	Actions:
Identify existing regional resources and assist with connectivity.	Strengthen partnerships between fishermen and agencies to broaden data collection.	Apply the policy iteratively using both quantitative and qualitative approaches.	Develop triggers and/or thresholds in harvest control rules for automatic adjustments.
Design/develop new training resources to interpret data/science and promote participation.	Facilitate training for fishermen on data quality standards and reporting expectations.	Identify data gaps that may be filled through qualitative approaches.	Define criteria and information sources to prompt near real-time management reactions.
Encourage individual engagement in education across topics.	Develop structured programs for fishermen to provide data for stock assessments.		Allow capacity for adjustments through the priority setting process.

Goal 4 – Optimize capacity to reflect fishery resources and improve fishing efficiency and safety

Description:
The Council will focus on forward-facing fishery management optimization. Ensuring that fishery capacity aligns with current and projected management objectives will improve the Council's ability to identify and prioritize management activities to support safe, profitable, and sustainable fisheries.

Objectives:

- Determine the appropriate level of investment for stocks, management plans, fishery components, and community factors.
- Define "optimal capacity" and establish metrics for harvesting capacity and/or system capacity (e.g., processing, infrastructure, labor, regulatory structures).
- Build consensus for identified objectives related to fleet size and vessel characteristics, community dependence, diversity, and accessibility of permits.

Strategies:

Strategy 1: Identify a justified investment level for all stocks across FMPs to reflect objectives and human resource capacity	**Strategy 2: Consider capacity issues in a piecemeal approach with manageable steps**	**Strategy 3: Dedicate resources to directly address fishery capacity issues and questions**
Actions:	Actions:	Actions:
Complete the Risk/Value Matrix in collaboration with regional partners and stakeholders.	Leverage ongoing Inflation Reduction Act initiatives (e.g., permit portfolios, governance, groundfish transition).	Establish a regional working group and organize listening sessions for target audiences.
Consider the use of Ecosystem Component Species designations for current and future management needs.	Utilize results from the vessel baseline restriction evaluation.	Commit to a process to advance goals with detailed milestones and decision points.

Implementation & Accountability

The strategic plan is only as effective as its execution. To move from a reactive to a resilient state, this plan must be treated as a core organizational function. This section outlines the framework for operationalizing our strategic goals and provides an example structure for tracking progress, aligning resources, and maintaining transparency with our stakeholders. To appropriately implement the strategies described in this plan, we must deliberately align our internal systems, governance structures, and culture. The approaches listed below will be formalized through the development of an Implementation Plan.

The Council will adopt a diligent performance management approach to clearly define and implement initiatives, engage key stakeholders, track and communicate progress, and improve processes through continuous feedback. In addition, the Council will synchronize its strategic goals with its annual priority-setting process to ensure that long-term objectives inform the establishment of priorities rather than compete with them.

Progress Reports

The Council's Executive Director and Executive Committee will conduct periodic reviews to (1) monitor the percentage of time allocated to strategic initiatives, (2) assess progress toward strategic targets, (3) identify risks, constraints, and barriers, and (4) identify and recommend adjustments.

Annual Priority Alignment

Every year, the Council will demonstrate how the proposed priorities directly support the strategic goals outlined in this plan. No annual initiative should move forward without a documented link to (1) a strategic goal, (2) a measurable outcome, and (3) identified ownership and resource allocation. This alignment mechanism ensures strategic continuity and prevents mission drift.

Adaptive Mid-Cycle Adjustments

To remain agile, the Council will consider triggers that allow for mid-cycle adjustments, for example, when:

- External regulatory or environmental conditions change;
- Resource availability changes;
- Performance indicators fall substantially below target; or
- Risk increases beyond predefined thresholds.

Adaptive adjustments will be documented and formally reviewed by the Council to maintain transparency and governance integrity.

Appendix A – Supporting Language for Mission Statement

The Council and their fishery management process, plans, and responsibilities are rooted in the MSA. The mission statement for the Council was derived from the following text of the MSA.

In MSA Section 2 - FINDINGS, PURPOSES, AND POLICY

> (a) "The Congress finds and declares… (6) A national program for the conservation and management of the fishery resources of the United States is necessary to prevent overfishing, to rebuild overfished stocks, to ensure conservation, to facilitate long-term protection of essential fish habitats, and to realize the full potential of the Nation's fishery resources."

And in MSA Section 3 - DEFINITIONS:

> (5): "The term 'conservation and management' refers to all of the rules, regulations, conditions, methods, and other measures:
> (A) which are required to rebuild, restore, or maintain, and which are useful in rebuilding, restoring, or maintaining, any fishery resource and the marine environment; and;
> (B) which are designed to assure that—
>
> > (i) a supply of food and other products may be taken, and that recreational benefits may be obtained, on a continuing basis;
> > (ii) irreversible or long-term adverse effects on fishery resources and the marine environment are avoided; and
> > (iii) there will be a multiplicity of options available with respect to future uses of these resources."

The Council was formally established under MSA Section 302(a)(1)(A):

> "The New England Fishery Management Council shall consist of the States of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut and shall have authority over the fisheries in the Atlantic Ocean seaward of such States (except as provided in paragraph (3)). The New England Council shall have 17 voting members, including 11 appointed by the Secretary in accordance with subsection (b)(2) (at least one of whom shall be appointed from each such State)."

Further, the MSA explicitly details the Council's functions under MSA Section 302(h), including FMP requirements:

> (1) "…for each fishery under its authority that requires conservation and management, [each Council shall] prepare and submit to the Secretary (A) a fishery management plan, and (B) amendments to each such plan that are necessary from time to time (and promptly whenever changes in conservation and management measures in another fishery substantially affect the fishery for which such plan was developed);

As part of the January 2026 Planning Workshop, specific MSA language was discussed to reaffirm the Council's mission outlined in Section 302(a)(1)(A). The Council's mission statement was enhanced to include the underlined text from MSA Section 303(a)(1)(A):

> "Any fishery management plan which is prepared by any Council, or by the Secretary, with respect to any fishery, shall contain the conservation and management measures, applicable to foreign fishing and fishing by vessels of the United States, which are necessary and appropriate for the conservation and management of the fishery <u>to prevent overfishing and rebuild overfished stocks, and to protect, restore, and promote the long-term health and stability of the fishery</u>."

Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Recreation Demand Model Topics for Discussion

February 2026

The Recreation Demand Model (RDM) has been used in the specifications setting process for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass since 2023. Every two years, in line with the information received from updated stock assessments for the three species, the model is updated and used to (1) Predict harvest under status quo recreational management measures in the upcoming two years to determine if status quo measures are expected to exceed, fall below, or be close to the recreational harvest limit (RHL) in line with the process outlined by the Harvest Control Rule (2023-2025) and Recreational Measures Setting Process (2026 and beyond); (2) Determine non-preferred coastwide recreational management measures for summer flounder and black sea bass; (3) Determine state waters recreational management measures for all three species. In 2023, states had to send sets of measures directly to Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) staff for testing, which put a heavy and time-consuming workload on the NEFSC staff during a time when the model is also needed for the groundfish fishery in New England. Since 2024, a cloud-based decision support tool (DST) has been developed and utilized by the states to set state-waters measures. In 2025, the DST was used for the first time to help Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) staff determine non-preferred coastwide recreational management measures. The DST has streamlined the specifications setting process allowing Council staff and each state to be able to test their own measures through the tool.

While the RDM and associated DST have provided increased efficiency in the specifications setting process for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass, areas for improvement and questions about the future use of the tool remain. Specifically, every two years when the model is calibrated, changes of varying magnitude are made to update and improve the model. The Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Technical Committee (TC) and Monitoring Committee (MC) have met with the RDM team each time the model has been updated and calibrated to discuss model changes, but there is no formal review process or established timeline for implementing big model changes. Establishing a set of operating procedures could be benefitable for the coordination and use of the RDM and DST.

There have been challenges in the past where changes were made or proposed following the TC/MC review of changes, changes discussed by the TC/MC were not made, or changes were made and not discussed at all by the TC/MC or only discussed by small groups. For smaller changes, improved communication such as a structured

model calibration process with a defined schedule and check-ins between the Commission staff, Council staff, GARFO, and NEFSC would help to keep everyone on the same page.

A formal review process for large changes to the RDM may be beneficial and improve transparency to managers and the public when more impactful changes are made to the configuration of the model. Through a formal review process, the public, Commissioners and Council members, and staff can all be made aware of improvements to the model, the reasoning behind improvements, and their expected impacts on estimation of harvest and catch. Additionally, such a review process would help provide an opportunity for a more formal conversation between managers and NEFSC staff as changes to the model may have management implications.

Beyond model calibration, the DST has faced its own challenges and growing pains in the first few years of implementation. Currently, the DST is funded through NOAA fisheries. However, if funding for the DST is ever in jeopardy, there is no mechanism for other organizations utilizing the RDM (i.e., Commission and Council) to provide funding support to host the tool. If the DST is unavailable during specifications setting years, a large additional workload would be placed on NEFSC staff who need to individually run all state and non-preferred coastwide measures options. These options can be numerous depending on changes needed to recreational management measures. For example, when setting specifications for summer flounder and scup for 2024 and 2025, states submitted a combined total of 89 recreational management measure options. This number does not include the measures tested, but not selected for Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Management Board (Board) approval. This range of options would not be possible without DST availability providing greater flexibility for states to test different ranges of measures that meet the needs of their stakeholders.

The challenge of funding the DST goes hand in hand with the limited number of individuals capable of running the model. Future improvements using the RDM in the specifications setting process for summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass may consider training staff at the Commission or other organizations to run the model. Currently, only three NEFSC staff are familiar with the model, with two of the three NEFSC staff on the RDM team being contract employees. Having additional staff at the Commission/states or elsewhere familiar with the RDM would ensure there would always be staff available to run the RDM if there are issues with federal funding and/or staffing. Allowing organizations outside NEFSC to provide RDM support during any given specifications setting year will provide a safety net for setting summer flounder, scup, and black sea bass specifications. In addition to specifications needs, additional RDM team support is occasionally requested during the development of management

actions such as the Recreational Measures Setting Process Framework/Addenda and the Sector Separation Amendment. These requests cannot always be accommodated due to NEFSC staff workloads. Having greater access to the model, and the DST if possible, during non-specifications setting times would greatly support the development of such management actions.

Finally, the configuration of the DST from cycle-to-cycle has recently posed challenges to the state specification setting process. When the DST was first launched for the 2024 and 2025 specifications setting cycle, the MC/TC met once a month, starting June 2023 through January 2024, with NEFSC staff to provide feedback on tool functionality to ensure it met the needs of the TC/MC (e.g., easy to understand interface, providing intuitive output, allowing capability to download results, etc.). These meetings allowed all DST users, including modelers to more intimately understand the needed outputs for each user group. It is highly recommended these meetings resume in future years to restore communication on changes being made to the DST and to avoid setbacks in the state measures setting process which is often required to have a quick turnaround time. For the 2026-2027 specifications setting cycle specifically, changes were made to the results output by the DST, which was not communicated prior to December 2025 to Commission staff or the TC/MC. The TC/MC had expected to be able to input measures in the DST and receive a median harvest estimate, which was the output received from 2023-2025. However, NEFSC staff had updated the tool's output to provide results by individual draw, with the reasoning that it is more statistically accurate to calculate the percent change using the individual draws, compared to using the median harvest estimate. By make this change, the states had to calculate by hand the median of each of the 100 seeds for each option, which forced the states to limit the options they could explore because of the time needed to read the code as well as the increased opportunity for human error when reading though the volume of data. A conversation with TC/MC and RDM team to discussed why this change was being made and possible implications of the change prior to making the change could have prevented the major problems for the states. In addition, Commission staff would have been able to discuss the implications of this altered output, and considerations of how the altered output would impact the state measures submission process ahead of time, to be able to adjust as necessary.

Northeast Region Coordinating Council
2026 Stock Assessment Schedule

	Stock	Management Organization
June Management Track	Atlantic herring	NEFMC, ASMFC
	Haddock (Georges Bank)	NEFMC
August Research Track	Longfin inshore squid	MAFMC
September Management Track	American plaice	NEFMC
	Haddock (Gulf of Maine)	NEFMC
October Management Track	Longfin inshore squid*	MAFMC

*NEFSC direct delivery to MAFMC

Additional 2026 Assessment Related Work

NEFSC will provide **data updates** for:

- Atlantic halibut
- Atlantic surfclam
- Black sea bass
- Bluefish
- Chub mackerel
- Golden tilefish
- Red hake (northern, southern)
- Scup
- Silver hake (northern, southern/offshore)
- Spiny dogfish
- Summer flounder
- Witch flounder

NEFSC will provide **data updates** and **projections updates** for:

- Butterfish
- Ocean quahog
- Pollock

ASMFC will continue the research track assessment work for:

- Striped bass (peer review in spring 2027)

Appendix: Stock Assessment Related Definitions

Research Track Assessments
Research track assessments are complex scientific efforts focused either on assessments of individual stocks or research topics that apply to assessments of several stocks. These assessments are typically carried out over several years and may involve comprehensive evaluation of new data streams and model changes. Research track assessments are designed to directly inform future management track assessments but might not immediately inform management decisions.

Management Track Assessments
Management track assessments provide routine, scheduled, updated advice to directly inform management actions. Management track assessments are designed to be simpler, quicker, and more efficient than Research Track assessments. The management track assessment process provides scientists some flexibility to improve the science when problems arise or new data become available, without requiring a research track assessment.

Data Updates
Data updates are summaries of new data that have become available since the last management track assessment. Specifically, they update (1) total U.S. catch (landings and discards) by commercial and recreational sector, as appropriate, and (2) aggregated NEFSC survey indices.

Projections Updates
Using the existing peer-reviewed assessment model, projections are updated by adding realized catch for recent years instead of assumed catch and re-running the projections out for a specified number of years. The updated projections do not update the assessment model or the terminal year of the assessment.

Northeast Region Coordinating Council
2027 Stock Assessment Schedule

	Stock	Management Organization
Spring Research Track	Striped bass	ASMFC
June Management Track	Atlantic cod (Georges Bank)	NEFMC
	Atlantic mackerel	MAFMC
	Black sea bass	MAFMC, ASMFC
	Bluefish	MAFMC, ASMFC
	Scup	MAFMC, ASMFC
	Summer flounder	MAFMC, ASMFC
September Management Track	Atlantic cod (Eastern Gulf of Maine)	NEFMC
	Atlantic cod (Western Gulf of Maine)	NEFMC
	Atlantic cod (Southern New England)	NEFMC

Additional 2027 Assessment Related Work

NEFSC will provide **data updates** and/or **projections updates** for additional stocks. This document will be updated once the NRCC approves the stock list for update related work, and if any changes occur to the above assessment schedule.

Appendix: Stock Assessment Related Definitions

Research Track Assessments
Research track assessments are complex scientific efforts focused either on assessments of individual stocks or research topics that apply to assessments of several stocks. These assessments are typically carried out over several years and may involve comprehensive evaluation of new data streams and model changes. Research track assessments are designed to directly inform future management track assessments but might not immediately inform management decisions.

Management Track Assessments
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State-Federal Commercial Landings Sampling Workshop

September 22-23, 2025

Virtual Workshop

Russell W. Brown[1], Editor

Contributing Authors (in alphabetical order): Nicole Ares[2], Jodi Baxter[3], Russell W. Brown[1], Micah Dean[4], Kerri Dobbs-Kazen[5], Garry Glanden[6], William Hoffman[7], Jesse Hornstein[8], Nicole Lengyel[9], Jeff Kipp[10], Brian Linton[11], Katherine McCardle[12], Tina Moore[13], Chad Power[14], Nicole Rossi[15], Ethan Simpson[16], Skye Thomas[17], Victor Vecchio[18], and Jesica Waller[19].

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Executive Summary:

The Northeast Region Coordinating Council sponsored a State-Federal Commercial Landings Sampling Workshop on September 22 & 23, 2025. The workshop was organized in response to concerns about decreased biological sampling (e.g., lengths, ages) of commercial landings in the Greater Atlantic region which threatens the data underpinnings of stock assessments used to support fisheries management. The workshop had four objectives: 1) promote information exchange relative to sampling activities among state and federal programs; 2) share sampling technology and best practices among programs, 3) evaluate the collective dependency of our landings sampling programs on various sources of funding; and 4) generate recommendations to improve sampling coordination and data accessibility. Presentations were made by most state agency sampling programs from Maine to North Carolina, as well as the NOAA Fisheries Port Biological Sampling program. Presentations by NOAA Fisheries and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's ACCSP program also covered needs and uses of biological data to characterize landings data used in stock assessment programs, the transition of the NOAA Fisheries sampling program to the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, and data storage and archiving systems to make data available to data users. The workshop generated five recommendations related to technology adoption, communications and outreach strategies, data standardization and centralization, funding recommendations and cooperative sampling programs.

Full 43-page report available at:
https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/13O_T5Q1tOSlsncNWJStHuH5g42nbd478?ths=true

Fact Sheet 2025

Biological Port Sampling Program

NOAA FISHERIES

National Marine Fisheries Service

Northeast Fisheries Science Center

Biological Port Sampling Timeline

• The port sampling program began in the 1970s as the Northeast Port Biological Sampling Program (NEPBSP) with Federal Port Agents collecting samples.
• In the mid 1990s, a provider company was contracted to provide additional samplers due to the programs growing complexity and size.
• In 2011, the NEPBSP began exclusively using contracted port samplers.
• On October 1, 2025 the NEFSC took over management of the program and merged it with the Northeast Fisheries Observer Program (NEFOP).

What is Biological Port Sampling?

NOAA Fisheries collects statistical information and biological samples used to support the management of marine fisheries. Contractors collect information from industry participants harvesting or purchasing marine species, and biological samples. The Biological Port Sampling Program is the primary NOAA-funded program that collects biological samples used to characterize the size and age composition of landed commercial catch. In this program, samplers collect data at sea and in port, at the docks or at fish houses and dealer facilities. Biological Port Sampling began with simplified sampling by Port Agents going as far back as the 1970s and has expanded since then to a full sampling collection program.

What Laws Require Seafood Dealers and Processors to Allow Biological Port Samplers Into Their Facility?

Under the **Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act** (Public Law 94-265) initially implemented in 1976, and most recently amended in 2006; and with the passage of the **Sustainable Fisheries Act in 1996**, the Secretary of Commerce (Secretary) has the responsibility for conservation and management of the nation's marine fishery resources. Authorities also exist under the **Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act**. Much of this responsibility has been delegated to NOAA /NMFS.

Under these authorities, certain federally permitted fishing vessel owners (50 C.F.R. §648.4, 50 C.F.R. §697.4), seafood dealers and processors (50 C.F.R. §648.6, 50 C.F.R. §697.6) are required to submit reports detailing their activity. Both ongoing and periodically, other data collection activities are undertaken in an effort to more fully describe these and other fisheries. One of the ongoing efforts is the Biological Port Sampling Program.

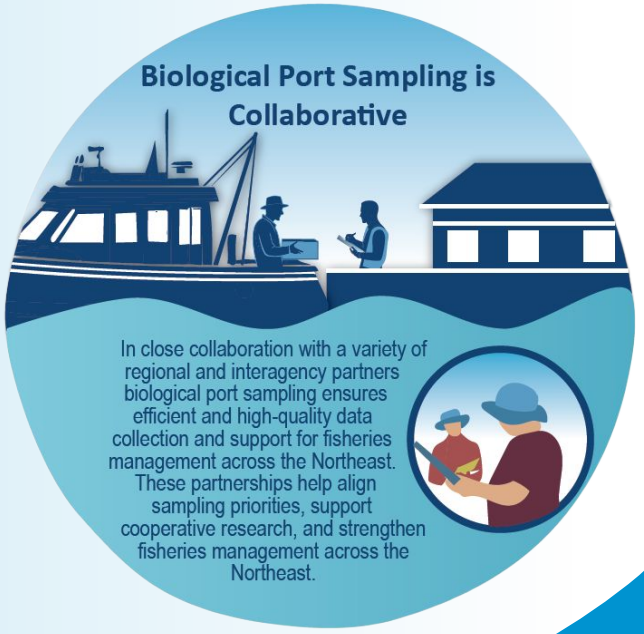
Why Your Role Matters

As part of this responsibility, the Secretary is required to ensure that fishery management decisions are based on the best scientific information available. Biological port sampling is one of the most effective ways to meet this requirement, and dealer and processor facilities provide the best opportunity to collect this information. We are sampling in your facility because we value your role in the industry and recognize that your cooperation is essential to maintaining high-quality data. This information directly supports sustainable fisheries management, benefiting both the resource and the fishing communities that depend on it.

Biological Port Sampling Collaboration with Agency Partners

Some of the partners NOAA works closely with include:

- Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council
- New England Fishery Management Council
- Northeast Regional Coordination Council
- Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries
- Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission
- Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program



MORE INFORMATION:

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What to Expect from a Biological Port Sampler

As of October 1, 2025, the Biological Port Sampling Program is a component of the Northeast Fisheries Observer Program (NEFOP). They are managed collectively as one comprehensive program. Biological port samplers will be collecting data on vessels at-sea and in port, and at fish houses and dealer facilities, from Maine to North Carolina. You may be contacted by the provider to coordinate biological port samplers entering your facility to collect data on catch that is offloaded from federally permitted commercial fishing vessels.

The port sampler will need space to set up their sampling station to measure fish lengths, and remove otoliths, which will be taken through the gills to protect the integrity of the fish whenever possible. The length and age data are used in fishery stock assessments. These data are critical for generating accurate, science based stock assessments, which support sustainable catch limits and help ensure long term viability and economic stability for the fishing industry. Stratification by time period, landing region, gear, and/or market category (e.g., small, large, scrod, market, whale) is necessary to accurately estimate age at length for many stocks.

How Biological Port Samplers Are Trained

Biological port samplers are required to follow all guidelines set forth by fish houses and dealer facilities. This includes wearing any required PPE such as hair nets, face masks or shields, slip-resistant boots, aprons, nitrile gloves, etc.

Biological port samplers are trained in plant safety protocols and have successfully completed a safety training course designed for work at the dock, in fish houses and dealer facilities. This training includes safe handling practices, chemical safety, and facility awareness.

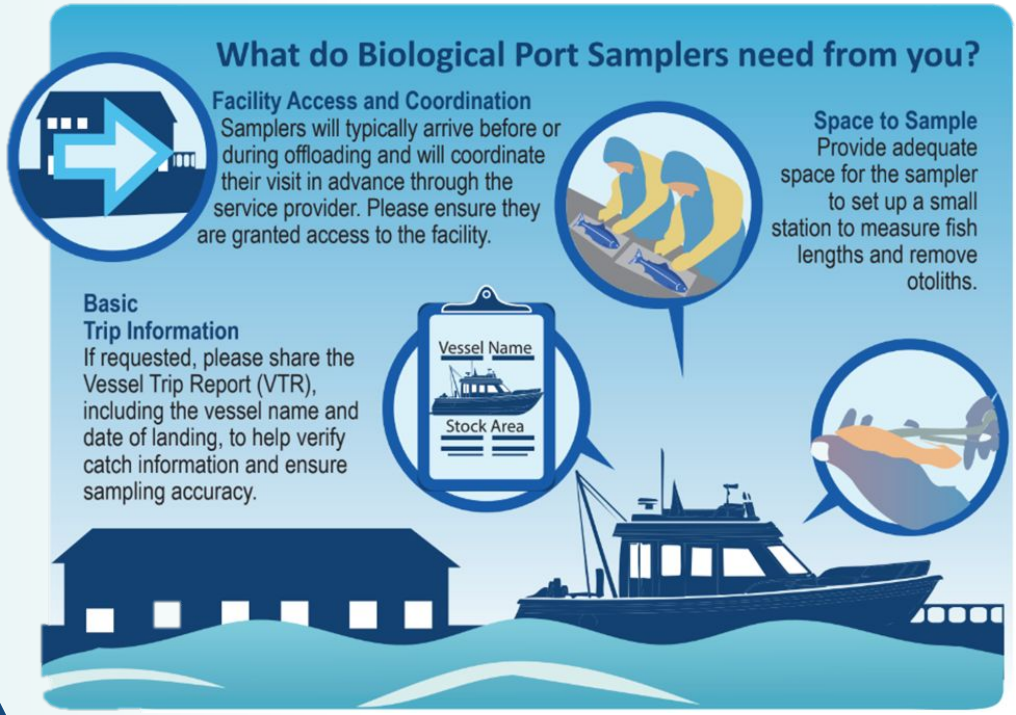
Each sampler is issued their own knife with a plastic handle, in accordance with industry hygiene standards. In addition to safety training, all samplers are highly trained in biological sample collection techniques, including proper fish handling, measuring, and otolith removal.

U.S. Fisheries: Part of our Heritage

U.S. domestic fisheries are essential to our nation's economy, food security, and cultural heritage. They support and sustain our country, providing jobs, seafood, and traditions that are passed down through generations. By working together to collect the best information available, we strengthen our coastal communities, protect our shared heritage, and ensure that U.S. fisheries remain vibrant and sustainable for future generations.

What do Biological Port Samplers need from you?

Access to a Subsample of Catch Per Vessel: Samplers **do *not*** need access to the entire offload, only a small, representative subsample of specific species, based on market category (e.g., small, large, scrod, market, whale).



For more information or questions regarding BPS program operations contact
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Northeast Fisheries Science Center
166 Water Street
Woods Hole, MA 02543-1026

December 23, 2025

Dear Federal Fishing Permit Holder or Seafood Dealer and Processor,

NOAA fisheries collects statistical information and biological samples sufficient to characterize and manage marine fisheries. Under this effort, Contractor personnel collect information from industry participants harvesting or purchasing marine species, and collect biological samples to obtain the necessary information. The Northeast Port Biological Sampling Program (NEPBSP) is the primary NOAA funded program that collects biological samples (primarily size and age samples) used to characterize the size and age composition of the landed commercial catch. Observers will collect data at sea and in port, at the docks or fish houses/dealer facilities, in order to increase sample collection efficiently.

Under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Public Law 94-265) (MSFCMA) initially implemented in 1976, and most recently amended in 2006; and with the passage of the Sustainable Fisheries Act in 1996, the Secretary of Commerce (Secretary) has the responsibility for conservation and management of the nation's marine fishery resources. Authorities also exist under the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act. Much of this responsibility has been delegated to the NOAA/NMFS. Under this stewardship role, the Secretary is authorized to adopt such regulations as may be necessary to create sustainable fisheries by eliminating overfishing while achieving, on a continuing basis, the optimum yield from each fishery. One of the regulatory steps taken, to ensure that these measures are based on the best available scientific information, is the collection of data from the users of the resource.

Under these authorities, certain federally permitted fishing vessel owners (50 C.F.R. §648.4, 50 C.F.R. §697.4), seafood dealers and processors (50 C.F.R. §648.6, 50 C.F.R. §697.6) are required to submit reports detailing their activity. These reporting regulations are codified at 50 C.F.R. §648.7 and 50 C.F.R. §697.6. The Fishing Vessel Trip Report (FVTR), and recently developed electronic vessel trip reports (eVTR) are the form(s) used to detail most vessels' activity during a fishing trip, while dealers use electronic systems to report their purchases. Additionally, vessels permitted to participate in the Surf Clam/Ocean Quahog fishery are required to report activity in that fishery on the vessel catch report. Both ongoing and periodically, other data collection activities are undertaken in an effort to more fully describe these and other fisheries. One of the on-going efforts is the NEPBSP. Contractors use vessel trip reports and dealer reports as a reference to inform their biological sampling activities. Data from these sources are appended to sampling data and are used to validate some data collected for a sample.

In order to increase the number of biological samples obtained, reduce costs, gain efficiencies and streamline multiple projects, the NEPBSP is now a component of the Northeast Fisheries Observer Program (NEFOP), managed collectively as one comprehensive program, and was implemented on October 1, 2025. Port sampling is conducted on a market category basis at the ports/docks/fish houses/dealers across the region. In conjunction with at-sea NEFOP duties, the port sampler measures lengths and removes otoliths or scales from a subsample of the fish measured for length for some species, and these samples are returned to the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) for aging. The length and age data are then used in the stock assessments. Stratification by time period, landing region, gear and/or market category is necessary to accurately estimate numbers at length for many stocks.

Sincerely,

Chad Keith
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