



New England Fishery Management Council

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

MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 2, 2026
TO: Habitat Committee
FROM: Melissa Smith, Committee Chair

SUBJECT: Charge to Committee for June 12, 2026 meeting

There will be a Habitat Committee meeting on June 12, 2026, via webinar. The meeting will begin at 9:00 am and we aim to conclude the meeting by 1:30 pm. See here to register for the webinar: <https://nefmc-org.zoom.us/meeting/register/SNbcPOqUSdWbgijKGTNJtg>.

Summaries of recent Advisory Panel (May 29) and Plan Development Team (April 1, April 30) meetings are provided as they relate to the agenda items for this meeting. For prior summaries see the Council website habitat page.

Three-Year Dedicated Habitat Research Area Review

A periodic three-year status/sunset review of the two Dedicated Habitat Research Areas (DHRAs) designated via Omnibus EFH Amendment 2 (OHA2) is underway. The sunset review process grants authority to the GARFO Regional Administrator to remove one or both designations as recommended by the Council. This past fall and winter, GARFO gathered information on research activities in the two areas that required federal permits or letters of acknowledgement. GARFO staff prepared a report documenting research activity in the two DHRAs. The PDT reviewed the report, considered the objectives established for DHRAs in OHA2, and developed recommendations for the Advisory Panel and Committee to consider (the PDT memo is Document 3, the GARFO report is enclosed with the PDT's memo). The Advisory Panel also developed recommendations to the Committee.

The PDT recommends continuing the Georges Bank DHRA pending further discussion of opportunity costs. Specifically, these costs are related to providing for future research opportunities in a management area where fishing activity has been controlled since 1994 vs. facilitating potential harvest opportunities should gear restrictions associated with the DHRA be lifted. The Advisory Panel recommended sunsetting the Georges Bank DHRA, given a lack of past or planned research in the area that addresses OHA2 objectives.

The PDT recommends retaining the Stellwagen DHRA based on documented past, ongoing, and potential future research that addresses habitat research questions posed by the Council via OHA2. The Advisory Panel recommended that the Committee request further information on the Stellwagen DHRA, specifically whether the research occurring in the DHRA is dependent on the restrictions associated with

the DHRA designation. There are two other managed areas that overlap the DHRA and in combination, the Western Gulf of Maine Habitat Closure Area, and Western Gulf of Maine Closure Area restrict the types of fishing prohibited because of the DHRA designation. The Advisory Panel also sought clarification on whether the DHRA designation facilitates the ability of researchers to obtain permits. The PDT memo that was provided to the AP is being shared with the Committee without edits, but staff will research these two issues prior to our meeting and provide any additional information in the slide presentation.

At this meeting, the Committee is being asked to develop a recommendation to the Council about each of the DHRAs. The Council will then advise the Regional Administrator. The intent is to finalize Council recommendations for both areas on June 24.

In addition to the DHRAs subject to the sunset provision, GARFO and the PDT took this opportunity to consider research activities in other areas designated by the Council. The Jordan Basin DHRA was established through the Coral Amendment, and while it does not have any restrictions on fishing, it does serve as a focal point for coral-focused research and mapping efforts. The PDT memo (Document 3) includes a section describing recent activities in the Jordan Basin DHRA. Two other research areas are the Rose and Crown and Davis Bank areas within the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (HMA). The GARFO report (Enclosure to Document 3) touches on activities in these areas; a more detailed description of recent research will be provided via the Clam Exemption Program Evaluation report later this year (next agenda item). No Committee action on these areas is required.

Great South Channel Habitat Management Area Clam Exemption Program Evaluation

Through OHA2, the Council created, adjusted, or maintained a range of HMAs throughout the New England Region. One of the newly created areas was the Great South Channel HMA, implemented in April 2018 as a closure to mobile bottom tending gear¹. The Great South Channel HMA encompasses a large portion of Nantucket Shoals, which is an important area for the Atlantic surfclam fishery, which is managed by the Mid-Atlantic Council. Recognizing the value of these shoals and HMA to the surfclam fishery, an exemption program, developed through the Council's 2018 Clam Dredge Framework and implemented in June 2020, established three areas within the Great South Channel HMA where vessels may fish for Atlantic surfclams or blue mussels with dredge gear ([final rule](#)).

In response to industry interest in additional surfclam fishing access the Council voted in December 2025 to "conduct an evaluation of the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area surfclam exemption areas" as a 2026 work priority. The objective of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of surfclam exemption areas in the HMA from both habitat conservation and fishery perspectives, considering recent data and information. The report will not explicitly evaluate the effectiveness of the two research areas nor the habitat or surfclam resource conditions in portions of the HMA outside of the three exemption areas, but it will consider the results of work conducted in the research areas. The Council will not modify the surfclam exemption program in 2026; 2026 work is focused solely on the evaluation of the program and any proposed changes to the exemption program could be considered as a future Council work priority.

Staff will describe the intended scope of the report and information to be considered by the PDT (Document 4). The Advisory Panel reviewed the report outline and suggested that the evaluation should

¹ These gear restrictions apply to any vessels using these gears within the HMAs, regardless of which fishery they are in or which Council manages that fishery.

do the following:

- a) Expand the scope of the evaluation to include habitat and surfclam resource conditions in portions of the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area outside the McBlair, Old South, and Fishing Rip exemption areas.
- b) Examine the science supporting the original Great South Channel Habitat Management Area designation in Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2, including whether the productivity rationale advanced for protection of complex benthic habitat important for juvenile cod and other groundfish has been borne out by evidence developed since 2018.
- c) Treat the natural disturbance regime of the Great South Channel as a central analytical input, including an assessment of whether gear impact recovery times on this seabed are shorter than, comparable to, or longer than the natural disturbance return interval.
- d) Incorporate the Coonamessett Farm Foundation multibeam sonar, drop camera, and compensation fishing research outputs as primary data on habitat condition and recovery, rather than as contextual background.
- e) Examine updated cod spawning timing and location evidence relative to the boundaries and seasonal structure of the existing exemption areas.

The report outline provided to the Advisory Panel is being provided to the Committee without further edits; staff feedback on items a-e above will be provided in the slide presentation for Committee consideration.

Committee members are invited to comment on planned work and suggest refinements to the approach including additional information that might be relevant to the evaluation. Staff intend to prepare this report over the summer, for Committee review ahead of the September Council meeting.

2026 Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) Designation Framework

Initiated during the January 2026 Council meeting, this framework considers updated EFH designations for Acadian redfish, American plaice, Atlantic halibut, Atlantic sea scallop, Atlantic wolffish, haddock, ocean pout, offshore hake, pollock, red hake, silver hake, white hake, windowpane flounder, winter flounder, witch flounder, and yellowtail flounder (16 species in total). The methods used to develop both the EFH map and text definitions were established during the EFH 5-Year Review (completed January 2025) and on the 2025 EFH Designation Framework (final Council action September 2025, submitted to NOAA GARFO in April 2026). The framework will include a “no action” alternative, which consists of the existing Omnibus EFH Amendment 2 designations for all 16 species, and an “action” alternative, which updates all designations. The EFH mapping and text description methods generally rely on joint species distribution models and environmental and fishery independent survey data for estuaries and coastal habitats. Separate models are being developed for Atlantic sea scallop, Atlantic wolffish, and offshore hake. The primary application of the EFH designations is through NOAA’s EFH consultations, the process by which NOAA conveys conservation recommendations to federal agencies authorizing projects in both state and federal waters.

Staff will describe the designation approach and present draft maps and text (Document 5), which have already been reviewed by the PDT. Additional review with plan coordinators and other experts will begin in the coming days and continue through much of the summer as needed.

Committee members are encouraged to ask questions about the methods and provide specific feedback on the EFH maps and text for each of the species. Individual members are encouraged to request a meeting with Council staff if they would like to have a longer discussion of one or more species

designations. Another opportunity for Committee review will be offered in late summer, and final Council action is planned for September.

Other Business

This is an opportunity to raise items not otherwise noted on the agenda. If you have information to share in advance of the meeting, please let Ms. Smith and Council staff know.

Meeting materials

1. Staff presentation on DHRAs, Clam Exemption Program Evaluation, and Essential Fish Habitat Designations
2. Meeting summaries
 - a. Habitat Advisory Panel, May 29, 2026 (DRAFT)
 - b. Habitat Plan Development Team, April 30, 2026
 - c. Habitat Plan Development Team, April 1, 2026
3. Memo from Habitat Plan Development Team to Habitat Advisory Panel and Habitat Committee re Dedicated Habitat Research Areas
4. Great South Channel Habitat Management Area Clam Exemption Program Evaluation Report (annotated outline)
5. Essential Fish Habitat designation primers (updated week of June 1)
6. Correspondence

Additional information

- Meeting summary, September 11, 2025 Habitat Advisory Panel and Committee ([link](#))
- 2025 Essential Fish Habitat Framework and Appendices ([link](#))
- Essential Fish Habitat Review Reports ([link](#))
- Clam Framework Adjustment ([link](#))