



New England Fishery Management Council

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

MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 21, 2026
TO: Habitat Advisory Panel
FROM: Melissa Smith, Committee Chair

SUBJECT: Charge to Advisory Panel for May 29, 2026 meeting

There will be a Habitat Advisory Panel (AP) meeting on May 29, 2026, via webinar. The meeting will begin at 9:00 am and aim to conclude the meeting by 1:00 pm. See here to register for the webinar: <https://nefmc-org.zoom.us/j/9784650492>

Advisory Panel Information

As this is the first meeting of the 2026-2028 term and there are new Habitat Advisory Panel members, staff will provide an overview of procedures and policies.

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 is currently underway. This process was established via Omnibus EFH Amendment 2 (OHA2) and grants authority to the GARFO Regional Administrator to remove one or both designations. The DHRAs have been reviewed once previously in 2022; during that review the Council recommended that the Regional Administrator retain both the Georges Bank and Stellwagen DHRAs. 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 (Document 3) 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 (Document 4).

The PDT recommended retaining the Stellwagen DHRA based on documented past, ongoing, and potential future research that addresses habitat research questions posed by the Council via Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2. The PDT recommended 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 is encouraged to provide a recommendation to the Committee about whether to retain or sunset these DHRAs. A different recommendation can be made for each area. The Committee

will discuss this issue on June 12, and the Council will make a recommendation to the Regional Administrator during the June meeting.

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 Advisory Panel 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). Advisory Panel members are invited to comment on work to date and suggest refinements to the approach including additional information that might be relevant to the evaluation.

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

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.

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 occur in late spring and early summer. Advisory Panel 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 Advisory Panel 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 Advisory Panel 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 Mr. McGuire and Council staff know.

Meeting materials

1. Presentations
 - a. Advisory Panel Policies and Procedures
 - b. Staff presentation on DHRAs, Clam Exemption Program Evaluation, and Essential Fish Habitat Designations
2. Meeting summaries
 - a. Habitat Plan Development Team, April 30, 2026
 - b. 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
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](#))