

2026 WINTER INTERSESSIONAL NRCC MEETING SUMMARY

VIRTUAL

January 13, 2026

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC)

Dan McKiernan, Chair

Bob Beal, Executive Director

Toni Kerns, Fisheries Policy Director

Patrick Campfield, Fisheries Science Program Director

Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC)

Joe Cimino, Chair

Skip Feller, Vice-Chair

Dr. Chris Moore, Executive Director

Brandon Muffley, MAFMC staff

Dr. Paul Rago, Chair, Scientific and Statistical Committee

New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC)

Dan Salerno, Chair

Melanie Griffin, Vice Chair

Dr. Cate O'Keefe, Executive Director

Dr. Jamie Cournane, NEFMC staff

Dr. Conor McManus, Chair, Scientific and Statistical Committee

NOAA Fisheries Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC)

Dr. Jon Hare, Director, NEFSC

Dr. Michael Simpkins, Director, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division

NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO)

Mike Pentony, Regional Administrator

Moira Kelly, Assistant Regional Administrator for Sustainable Fisheries

Dr. Ashley Trudeau, Sustainable Fisheries Division (NRCC staff support)

Laura Deighan, Sustainable Fisheries Division (NRCC staff support)

Additional Attendees

Jackie Odell, NEFMC member

Megan Ware, NEFMC member

Mike Pierdinock, NEFMC member

Stephen Pearson, MAFMC staff

Hannah Hart, MAFMC staff

Kiley Dancy, MAFMC staff

Mary Sabo, MAFMC staff
Julia Beaty, MAFMC staff
Dr. José Montañez, MAFMC staff
Hayden Dubniczki, MAFMC staff
Jonathon Peros, NEFMC staff
Robin Frede, NEFMC staff
Emily Bodell, NEFMC staff
Jenny Couture, NEFMC staff
Dr. Rachel Feeney, NEFMC staff
Connor Buckley, NEFMC staff
David McCarron, NEFMC staff
Mark Grant, NEFMC staff
Alex Dunn, NEFMC staff
Brian Hooper, NEFSC, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division
Kristan Blackhart, NEFSC, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division
Jessica Blaylock, NEFSC, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division
Dr. Cameron Hodgdon, NEFSC, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division
Paul Nitschke, NEFSC, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division
Dr. Jason Boucher, NEFSC, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division
Dr. Kiersten Curti, NEFSC, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division
Michele Traver, NEFSC, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division
Dr. Sam Truesdell, NEFSC, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division
Dr. Tony Wood, NEFSC, Resource Evaluation and Assessment Division
Matt Rigdon, GARFO, Sustainable Fisheries Division
Dr. Jay Hermsen, GARFO, Sustainable Fisheries Division
Savannah Lewis, GARFO, Sustainable Fisheries Division
Travis Ford, GARFO, Sustainable Fisheries Division
Kelly Whitmore, Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries
Geoff White, Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program
Corrin Flora, Maine Department of Marine Resources

Public Attendees

Vito Giacalone, Northeast Seafood Coalition
+ 1 unidentified attendee

Welcome, Announcements, and Previous Action Items

Dr. Moore opened the meeting and provided an overview of the agenda. The Northeast Region Coordinating Council (NRCC) agreed to the agenda as proposed.

Ms. Deighan reviewed the action items and decisions from the previous two NRCC meetings (spring 2025, summer intersessional 2025). The fall 2025 NRCC meeting was cancelled due to a lapse in Federal government appropriations. Ms. Deighan noted that, although some previous action items would be discussed at the current meeting, time constraints did not allow for progress on all of them. She asked the NRCC members to prepare to close out the meeting with a discussion on which topics should be included on the spring 2026 NRCC agenda and which may require discussion via correspondence prior to the spring meeting (see ‘Meeting Wrap-Up for further discussion).

Budgets and Available Resources

Dr. Moore began the discussion with an update on the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s (MAFMC) budget, noting that there is a lot of uncertainty. MAFMC has planned around a lower budget and will need to revisit its priorities if the budget increases.

Mr. Pentony provided an overview of current information on the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office’s (GARFO) budget and resources. There is stress on the capacity and resources at GARFO, including the Northeast Fisheries Science Center’s (NEFSC) staff reductions, and 2026 appropriations are unknown. NRCC discussed the minibus funding bill that would provide 2026 appropriations for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of the Interior. The bill includes funding at a level similar to NOAA’s 2024 budget, \$45 million for the councils and commissions, and \$3 million for industry-based bottom trawl survey work. It passed the House on January 8, 2025, and was sent to the Senate. The Senate did not vote on cloture and had discussed some amendments, but it was unclear when the final vote would be. If a bill passes both the House and Senate, it would need to go to the President for his signature before NOAA’s budget is known.¹ Mr. Pentony noted that delivery of funding can still be delayed when there is a signed appropriations bill. If the bill is passed and there is a shutdown at the end of January, the agencies covered in the bill would continue to operate.

Mr. Pentony explained that GARFO’s ability to deliver expected work may still change under an even budget due to reduced staffing levels. GARFO does not have information on what resources will go into hiring, contracts, etc. It hopes to have this information before the current appropriations expire on January 30, 2026, and to have additional clarity on its budget and resources in the next few months. Until GARFO gets approval to hire or issue new contracts, it still has a lot of work to do with inadequate resources. Dr. Hare agreed that the situation is the same at NEFSC. Dr. Evan Howell’s (Deputy Assistant Administrator for Scientific Programs, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS)) priorities are clear: Assessments, advanced

¹ After the NRCC meeting, the Senate passed a motion for cloture and passed the bill, without amendment, on January 15, 2026. It was signed into law on January 23, 2026.

technologies, and modernization of core data workflows. NEFSC wants to take advantage of advanced technologies and to continue to build its cooperative research programs. NEFSC will focus its resources on assessments, surveys, and data collection.

The NRCC members discussed whether it would be reasonable to expect an increase in contracts to cover work that cannot be completed with NMFS's current staff resources, given the uncertainty around budgets, the possibility of similar funding levels, and current staffing levels. The answer to this question was not clear. Mr. Pentony explained that processes at NMFS operate differently than they did a few years ago. The Secretary of Commerce would likely be involved in reviewing any contracts, and the timeline to get them approved and implemented is unclear. In addition, any position NMFS wants to hire has to be reviewed by someone two or three levels higher than it would have been a few years ago. Some of NMFS's functions are inherently governmental, and some would typically be contracted out. Until GARFO and NEFSC have more guidance, it is unclear how they will get the capacity necessary to meet expectations.

Mr. Pentony and Dr. Hare then provided an overview of NMFS's 'Framework for Narrowing the Scope of NMFS Management and Science' (the Framework). Ms. Kelly Denit (Director, NMFS Office of Sustainable Fisheries) will give a more thorough presentation on the Framework at the Council Coordination Committee (CCC) meeting in May 2026. At the May 2025 CCC meeting, Ms. Denit presented the idea of prioritizing the species NMFS manages using a matrix with four quadrants describing the risks and value of each species. The Framework is intended to reduce the number of stocks managed under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. The goal is to prioritize which species should be managed and assessed to provide the most benefit to the industry and the public. The framework will impact longer-term resource allocation for both science and management.

The framework is based on agreed upon assumptions that: 1) NMFS and the councils can't continue to manage 500+ stocks and stock complexes; 2) changes to how fisheries are managed will impact staff, fisheries, and communities; 3) there is a need to balance national consistency and regional flexibility while maintaining accountability; 4) engagement internally and with partners is critical; 5) increased risk must be tolerated and strategically considered; and 6) uncertainty, risk, and stability are interrelated, and increased risk may result in lower stability over time.

To prioritize active science and management, the framework uses a matrix with four quadrants based on risk (y-axis) and value (x-axis). **Decision 1: During the discussion, NRCC agreed to call this "the risk-value matrix."** Each region will need to decide how it will quantify risk and value. Risk would consider factors such as the risk of stock depletion, susceptibility to environmental change, and ecosystem impacts, such as roles as forage species. Value would

incorporate revenue and social factors and would need to be implemented differently for commercial and recreational fisheries. NRCC members should start to think, at least qualitatively, about where stocks may fall within the four quadrants. Ultimately, the Greater Atlantic Region will want to follow the process and see if the low-risk/low-value species may be better as ecosystem component stocks or removed from management altogether. High-risk/high-value and low-risk/high-value stocks are likely to be kept within management.

A regional working group will be formed with representation from the NRCC member organizations. This process provides an opportunity to think about the region's assessment portfolio and its management needs. The working group's first task will be setting the criteria for value and risk, potentially considering qualitative metrics (e.g., recreationally important species). It would then use the criteria to place stocks in the risk-value matrix. Either the initial working group or a new working group would then discuss the rating process and identify management changes. This may not need to be a joint action between the Councils for stocks that aren't co-managed. Even for stocks that remain under management, placement in the matrix may have long-term impacts (e.g., on the frequency of assessments). Finally, there would be a concurrent process to combine the matrices nationally. Any changes to remove stocks from fishery management plans (FMP) will go through the council process. NMFS Headquarters worked with the NMFS West Coast Region to pilot this process for their stocks and may provide lessons learned.

Although this framework process is similar to the existing Assessment Working Group (AWG) and NRCC processes, the risk-value matrix and the use of the information produced will be different. NEFMC has long discussed the value of continued management of thorny skate, windowpane flounder, and some hakes. NRCC now has support from NMFS Headquarters to take on more risk with stock prioritization and management decisions. In response to a question about the Framework's impacts on NMFS's regional funding and staffing allocations, Mr. Pentony expressed uncertainty and concerns that the national matrix may influence those decisions. Regions with low-risk/low-value stocks could get less funding than those with high-risk/high-value stocks. Most NRCC participants can easily prioritize their stocks and conclude that the list may not change much, but that may not be true in all regions. Mr. Beal asked if the criterion of a stock being "primarily in state waters" indicated NMFS pulling back from supporting state management and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), which rely on Federal support (e.g., cobia assessments). If so, the framework process could disproportionately impact the states. Dr. Simpkins and Dr. Hare agreed that the implications are uncertain and that NRCC should continue to pay attention to its potential impacts.

Mr. Pentony and Dr. Hare noted that NMFS does not want to replicate the AWG's previous work, but that there is an opportunity to leverage it when determining the criteria for the matrix. Dr. Hare also stated that NEFSC does not want to redo the 2026 and 2027 schedules. The

framework process is likely to be long and involved. Dr. Hare suggested a light approach, requiring fewer full-time staff over a shorter period, to avoid stressing NEFSC resources. Dr. Hare and Mr. Pentony acknowledged that the timeline previously proposed by Ms. Denit (i.e., April 30, 2026²) is not realistic, but NMFS Headquarters has not yet provided an updated timeline. Mr. Pentony let Ms. Denit know that the Councils and ASMFC have already developed 2026 priorities, that this framework was not included, and that resources committed to this process will take resources away from other priorities. Dr. O’Keefe agreed that the timeline was not reasonable and added that subsequent AWG topics on the agenda for the current NRCC meeting will impact whether the risk-value matrix requires a light or heavy touch. This activity may inform what needs to be assessed under a stable budget, but the timeline remains unclear.

Dr. Simpkins added that, before AWG was established, prioritization was a heavy lift completed by the NRCC deputies with extensive cooperation across member groups. Individuals who contributed to this effort still work at NRCC member organizations, and that work could inform the new risk-value matrix process, including lessons learned. The group discussed whether the current AWG members would be the most appropriate choice for the regional working group. Some NRCC members suggested the working group could be a subgroup of the AWG (e.g., without Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) members); others suggested that AWG members may not be the right choice for the risk-value matrix working group. While AWG focuses on stock assessments, the working group may require other perspectives, such as the social and economic factors of fisheries' risk and value. Mr. Pentony suggested NRCC envision an iterative process between itself and the working group. NRCC ultimately agreed to consider working group membership but to await further guidance when Ms. Denit presents the process in January. **Action Item 1: NRCC agreed to meet virtually to establish a working group once NMFS Headquarters provides a clear directive.**³

NRCC members stated a preference for a bottom-up approach. The executive directors sent a letter to NMFS stating that, to be successful, the process needs to be handed to the regions. The non-Federal NRCC members requested that GARFO communicate this preference to Ms. Denit, and Mr. Pentony agreed.

Proposed 2026 Work Priorities

NEFMC

Dr. O’Keefe presented the [2026 New England Fishery Management Council \(NEFMC\) work priorities](#) established at its December meeting. NEFMC’s priorities primarily focus on essential regulatory tasks such as specifications and stock assessment support. They also include approved multi-year items, scheduled program reviews, and inter-agency tasks such as the SSC,

² NMFS HQ has since extended this deadline to June 30, 2026.

³ NMFS HQ presented the directive to all council executive directors on January 20, 2026.

Northeast Trawl Advisory Panel (also known as NTAP), and risk policy development. NEFMC will also prioritize tasks that were paused in 2025, new tasks identified in response to 2025 Council actions and issues, and new ideas proposed by FMP committees. NEFMC also has 6 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) initiatives and 15 months to complete them. Several of these initiatives are being completed in coordination with MAFMC and NMFS staff, and much of the work is scheduled for 2026.

In response to Executive Order (E.O.) 14276, NEFMC identified six main priorities and chose three to initiate in 2026: 1) Modifications to vessel baseline restrictions; 2) monkfish management modifications; and 3) FMP revisions. The remaining multiyear priorities are to address Atlantic herring slippage measures, revisions to accountability measures, and revisions to the Southern New England Spiny Dogfish Gillnet Exemption Area. Dr. O’Keefe added that cleaning up redundant or outdated regulations will be part of this effort. She briefly outlined the full list of 2026 NEFMC priorities, highlighting tasks related to the Risk Policy Working Group (completion expected by June 2026). Although on-demand gear is listed as a priority, related tasks have been postponed indefinitely.

ASMFC

Ms. Kerns presented ASMFC’s 2026 work priorities from its [2026 Action Plan](#), emphasizing cross-cutting initiatives relevant to NRCC member organizations. Key efforts include ongoing collaboration with GARFO and the Councils on on-demand gear regulation. ASMFC expects to complete a benchmark stock assessment for striped bass in 2027 and to launch a benchmark assessment for Atlantic sturgeon. ASMFC will continue to support the river herring and shad catch caps and bycatch avoidance programs and will review NEFMC’s new accountability measures for winter flounder. Additional updates include integrating newly-calibrated Fishing Effort Survey data into assessments, expanding eTRIPS mobile functionality, and coordinating the Northeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (also known as NEAMAP). ASMFC is cooperating with the U.S. Geological Survey on science, particularly for projects related to Atlantic sturgeon starting in 2028. Ms. Kerns noted that this research could inform NMFS’s endangered species work and directed NRCC members to Mr. Campfield for any questions.

Responding to a question about the 2028 sturgeon assessment, Ms. Kerns stated that ASMFC has not paused any of its research track or benchmark assessments. She acknowledged that support from NEFSC and datasets from other NRCC member organizations would be helpful. Dr. Simpkins requested a follow-up conversation about this assessment.

MAFMC

Dr. Moore outlined [MAFMC’s 2026 work priorities](#), starting with its 5-year strategic plan. Tasks for 2026 include new 2027-2028 specifications for blueline tilefish, longfin squid, butterfish, surfclam, and ocean quahog. MAFMC will conduct its annual review of multi-year

specifications for several species, including summer flounder, scup, black sea bass, bluefish, golden tilefish, Illex, Atlantic mackerel, chub mackerel, and spiny dogfish. Dr. Moore summarized MAFMC actions already in progress, including the recreational sector separation amendment, the omnibus essential fish habitat amendment, the recreational tilefish permitting and reporting framework, and the alternative gear-marking framework that Dr. O’Keefe discussed during NEFMC’s presentation. Dr. Moore noted that hearings are in progress for the omnibus essential fish habitat amendment.

Dr. Moore listed potential new actions for 2026. Four of these are prioritized in response to E.O. 14276:

- Conduct a scup winter I quota period landings threshold analysis and consider initiating management action.
- Review outcomes of the scup gear restricted areas (GRA) project and consider initiating a framework to modify the scup GRAs.
- Evaluate alternative trip limits for butterfish and solicit Advisory Panel (AP) input on other measures to increase butterfish quota utilization.
- Evaluate vessel baseline restrictions and consider initiating an omnibus management action in coordination with NEFMC.

In addition, MAFMC will evaluate and potentially develop a framework to address the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization Illex quota issue. MAFMC also plans to develop white papers on the following topics, which may lead to additional actions:

- Improvements to recreational data collection and use.
- Improvements to the surfclam and ocean quahog individual transferable quota program.
- Review of the deep-sea coral protection measures.
- Potential modifications to the frequency of multi-year specifications.

Finally, MAFMC will evaluate the use of confidence intervals and the effects of uncertainty within the Percent Change Approach on the management of the recreational black sea bass fishery. This analysis will help inform the development of guidance on the Percent Change Approach.

NMFS

Mr. Pentony presented 2026 priorities for GARFO, stating that it has the same priorities as the Councils and ASMFC to the extent that personnel and resources allow. The availability of personnel and resources through 2026 remains uncertain (see ‘Budgets and Available Resources’). Dr. Hare agreed and added information about other NEFSC priorities, including the development of new technologies. High-priority technologies include long-range autonomous underwater vehicles and increased use of passive acoustics. NEFSC uses passive acoustics to assist with right whale detection, but could expand its use, including for cod spawning detection.

NEFSC is also working to further its use of active acoustics by using industry platforms to collect additional active acoustic data. Dr. Hare described these activities as ongoing and supportive of other NRCC member organizations' priorities. He recounted that NMFS successfully migrated Oracle databases to the cloud by the end of fiscal year 2025. NEFSC plans to transfer other data holdings to the cloud by the end of 2026. NRCC members should contact NEFSC if they lose access to any data. In response to a question about the impetus to move data to the cloud, Dr. Hare answered that there are two main motivations: 1) Making data more accessible within and outside NMFS and 2) outsourcing upkeep of data infrastructure, which will support more efficient modernization.

Mr. Pentony stated that GARFO is interested in engaging NRCC members on the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team. This is necessary for Marine Mammal Protection Act and Endangered Species Act compliance because the current provisions expire in 2029. He added that NMFS will receive a second round of public comments from E.O. 14276, which will likely require the Councils and ASMFC to address additional priorities. Dr. O'Keefe noted that, depending on how the Councils are asked to respond, their priority planning may be affected. She asked GARFO to communicate to NMFS Headquarters that the Councils have been put in a tough position with several new initiatives, few resources, and little time.

Ms. Kerns requested an update on the Request for Information (RFI) on buoyless gear, noting that the two upcoming lobster association weekends would be prime opportunities to get feedback from the lobster fishery. Mr. Pentony responded that NMFS's work on the RFI was delayed by the government shutdown. It is unlikely to be ready for the Massachusetts Lobstermen's Association weekend, but it may be ready before the Maine Fishermen's Forum.

AWG Updates

Dr. Simpkins provided an update on AWG progress. AWG has proposed a 2027 assessment schedule, a schedule for deconflicting meetings in 2026, and potential approaches to simplify the assessment process. To manage NRCC expectations, he noted that the NRCC met in August 2025, and the October AWG meetings were cancelled due to the government shutdown. Non-Federal AWG members met twice during the shutdown. After the shutdown ended, AWG held two meetings to catch up and make progress on current tasks.

2026 Assessment Schedule Recap

The revised 2026 assessment schedule has one research track assessment for longfin squid. It includes five management track assessments for Georges Bank haddock, Atlantic herring, Gulf of Maine haddock, American plaice, and longfin squid. In addition, NEFSC will provide scallop specifications support and complete nine data updates, three of which will include updated

projections. MAFMC recently requested additional data updates, and the NEFSC is in the process of evaluating those requests.

2027-2028 Assessment Schedule

There were originally 20 management track assessments scheduled for 2027. AWG now proposes nine management track assessments: Black sea bass, bluefish, scup, summer flounder, Atlantic mackerel, Georges Bank cod, Eastern Gulf of Maine cod, Western Gulf of Maine cod, and Southern New England cod. NEFSC will also provide scallop management support. There is a risk that the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) data transitions will increase the challenges of the already complex scup and summer flounder assessments, which are handled by the same assessment lead. If this becomes a major issue, one of these assessments can be moved to 2028. Ms. Kerns noted that such a change would result in more work to support and run the recreation demand model (RDM). Dr. Simpkins noted that NEFSC and GARFO staff agreed it would be best to keep both assessments in the spring of 2027, but AWG is proactively planning for this risk. In the past, the availability of egg index data has been a problem for the Atlantic mackerel assessment. If the issue arises again, NEFSC could shift the assessment from spring to fall 2027. More than 20 data updates were proposed for 2027, and AWG is assessing their feasibility. The 2028 assessment schedule is a work in progress. There were originally 22 management track assessments proposed, but that does not include stocks that were removed from the 2026 and 2027 schedules.

The group discussed how NRCC should handle the uncertainty that the risk-value matrix process (see ‘Budgets and Available Resources’) may result in some stocks being de-prioritized or removed from the 2027 or 2028 assessment list. Dr. Simpkins said that removals from those near-term assessment lists are unlikely. He added that AWG’s previous discussions about ways to reduce the assessment workload are still relevant. Stocks were prioritized for the 2025, 2026, and 2027 schedules by considering factors such as the risks to management and the importance of the species. The risk-value matrix process is unlikely to meaningfully change the list of prioritized species. Later in the discussion, Dr. Hare added that NEFSC would map the risk-value index based on management’s needs and would then evaluate how to prioritize its work to meet those needs.

The NRCC members discussed how the proposed assessment schedules align with the resources, capacity, and priorities outlined earlier in the meeting. Dr. O’Keefe expressed concerns that uncertainty about future resources makes it hard to commit to a schedule two years in advance and that stocks like monkfish are already being left behind. She noted that the Councils and ASMFC planned for the 2026 schedule in light of changes to capacity, but planning two years into the future based on that capacity would be difficult for NEFMC to accept. It is hard to rationalize only three cod stocks being on the schedule for fall 2027 (with six assessments on the schedule for spring 2027) without more information on capacity and resources. She suggested

NEFSC try NEFMC's approach to map out staff capacity into the future as a way to provide NRCC with more clarity on how capacity lines up with the proposed number of assessments.

Dr. Simpkins responded that NEFSC may be able to provide more products with fewer resources by producing less complex assessment products for some stocks. He added that planning the schedule hinges on more than just the number of assessment scientists, which makes planning challenging. For example, the assessments rely on multiple sources of data that are affected by resource and capacity limits. In addition, it will be at least a year before NEFSC sees any increase in staffing.

Mr. Pentony stated that NOAA may get its 2026 budget this month, that Dr. Neil Jacobs (Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator) is supportive of NOAA's science work, and that NOAA may be able to hire more scientists as a result. Multiple NRCC members proposed that NRCC approve the 2027 assessment schedule as a minimum, based on current information. They suggested NRCC revisit the 2027 and 2028 schedules, with the option to add more stocks to the 2027 schedule, at the spring 2026 meeting, when more information is available. Dr. Simpkins and Dr. Hare agreed that NRCC approval of only part of the 2027 schedule would decrease the Population Dynamics Branch's ability to plan staff workloads, especially if new stocks are added. Setting the schedule further in advance helps NEFSC plan and complete assessment work.

Dr. Simpkins asked whether the intent is to return to a 5-year planning schedule. Dr. Moore said he supported returning to a 5-year schedule, while also recognizing the need to be adaptive. Dr. O'Keefe supported the proposal and noted that the group had discussed changes to regional stock assessments (e.g., changes to terminal years to increase flexibility of assessment timing) in May 2025. She suggested the NRCC revisit how it makes other adjustments with consideration beyond just one group's capacity. **Decision 2 and Action Items 2 and 3: The NRCC agreed to tentatively approve the 2027 assessment schedule and to revisit the 2027 and 2028 stock assessment schedules and discuss a return to a 5-year planning cycle at its spring 2026 meeting.**

Deconflicting 2026 Schedules

Dr. Simpkins presented a 2026 schedule to avoid meeting conflicts. AWG proposes to hold the peer review for Atlantic herring and Georges Bank haddock on June 29 and 30 and for American plaice and Gulf of Maine haddock on September 22 and 23. This would essentially swap the traditional timing of NEFMC's September meeting and the peer reviews. AWG also proposes that NEFSC provide the scallop annual management support directly, per usual, and the longfin squid management track assessment via direct delivery. **Decision 3: The NRCC accepted the proposed schedule to deconflict meeting schedules in 2026.**

Assessment Process Simplification

Dr. Simpkins discussed AWG's proposal to simplify the assessment process for 2026. AWG suggests continuing the pause on the Assessment Oversight Panel (AOP) because the majority of assessments are already being peer reviewed. AWG also suggests that the Research Track Steering Committee (RTSC) continue to be paused because all research track assessments remain paused. Dr. Simpkins noted that the longfin squid management track assessment is proposed to be provided through direct delivery. **Decision 4: The NRCC agreed to continue the AOP and RTSC pause and to have the longfin squid assessment be provided through direct delivery.**

Stakeholder Engagement in the Assessment Process

Dr. Simpkins stated that AWG has made limited progress on the topic of stakeholder engagement in the assessment process. AWG has developed ideas around three separate opportunities for stakeholder engagement: 1) Input to inform upcoming assessments; 2) input and updates that feed into current year assessments; and 3) closeout of past input on completed assessments. AWG's ideas on input to inform upcoming and ongoing assessments build on the management track assessment input sessions piloted in 2025. NEFSC staff would present information and questions at input sessions with industry, academics, Council and Commission staff, and other stakeholders to gather input to inform future assessments. Council and Commission staff would collect additional input on these questions at relevant Committee and AP meetings. This process would create pathways to share information with assessment leads. Dr. Simpkins suggested that Council staff may be able to share information about current conditions that they routinely gather from APs.

Dr. Simpkins described the closeout process for input received on past assessments as a work in progress. The goal is to compile information from input sessions into a consistent format for stakeholder distribution. NEFSC would also provide a summary of assessment plans in advance of the peer review, and, where appropriate, those plans would indicate connections to any prior input. Further, connections to input would be noted at assessment peer reviews. Dr. Simpkins clarified that these are ideas, not a proposal, and the AWG is still considering additional approaches to close the loop.

Dr. Simpkins also distinguished between efforts to get input on assessments and broader engagement efforts. He noted that other engagement planning efforts exist that AWG and NRCC can learn from. Other ideas include: 1) Finding key management and cross-partner meetings where information can be shared, and 2) matching the person who attends to the audience with continued consideration of capacity and efficiency.

NRCC discussed the tradeoffs of the assessment leads attending AP or similar meetings, rather than scheduling a separate meeting to collect input. The AWG considered this but felt this approach may miss some target audiences (e.g., academics) that don't attend AP meetings. Dr.

Hare noted the high value of stock-specific engagement events like AP meetings. Sending staff from outside NEFSC's Population Dynamics branch would help spread out workloads and meet broader engagement needs beyond stock assessments. The group also discussed whether summaries of input would be shared with managers. AWG is considering this option and noted the difference between summarizing input and describing how the input interacted with the assessment. Further planning will require mapping out the staff time required to complete the product. Mr. Salerno remarked that documentation of the input considered and how it is used would be helpful for all parties, not just scientists. He noted the potential for public engagement at the upcoming Northeast Cooperative Research Summit. Dr. Simpkins did not recall if the summit was discussed at the AWG meeting, but agreed that it was a good opportunity.

Dr. Simpkins asked if AWG should continue planning input sessions for 2026 and 2027. Dr. O'Keefe supported this and suggested keeping it simple by finding some dates and sharing them with NRCC to circulate. Mr. Salerno agreed. Ms. Blackhart noted the difficulty of incorporating additional input for the 2026 assessments and added that soliciting input for 2027 stocks would require an agreed schedule. Dr. Simpkins agreed that input on 2026 assessment plans would not be feasible at this late date, but said that information on current conditions could still inform assessment leads as they conduct the 2026 assessments. Dr. Hare clarified that input sessions in 2026 would be for assessments agreed upon in this meeting for 2027. If NRCC reevaluates the 2027 schedule at its spring meeting and makes changes, additional input sessions for added stocks would not be possible. **Action Item 4: The NRCC agreed to continue discussions about stakeholder engagement in the assessment process as part of its ongoing assessment process discussions at the spring 2026 NRCC meeting.**

During the discussion, Dr. Simpkins described other ideas under AWG consideration, including options for right-sizing the assessment process and expanding the peer review candidate pool. So far, AWG has not had time to progress these ideas, unpause research track assessments, or pursue other efficiencies in the assessment process.

Dr. Moore suggested that the NRCC discuss assessment priorities and research track assessment planning at its spring 2026 meeting. Dr. O'Keefe agreed, emphasized the importance of the topic, "other steps to mitigate assessment workload," and suggested it be reframed to "optimize the assessment workload."

Action Item 4: The group discussed whether NRCC should revisit the transition from the Age-Structured Assessment Program (ASAP) to the Woods Hole Assessment Model (WHAM) and agreed to discuss the topic at the spring 2026 meeting.

Meeting Wrap-Up

Ms. Deighan reviewed topics originally planned for the fall 2025 NRCC meeting that were not addressed during the intersessional:

- The AWG's transition from ASAP to WHAM
- A progress report on the Northeast Fishery Observer Program (NEFOP) and Port Biological Sampling Program (PBSP) merger process
- Collaboration between PBSP and the states
- Responses to E.O. 14276 and 14192
- Discussion about the RDM
- Vessel baselines
- The December 2024 letter from NEFMC to NEFSC
- Council operating agreements
- Updates on IRA projects and the East Coast Coordination Group's (ECCG) efforts
- For-hire did-not-fish (DNF) reports
- Updates on MRIP

Decision 5 and Action Item 4: The NRCC agreed to revisit AWG's proposal to transition from ASAP to WHAM at the spring 2026 NRCC meeting, grouping it with the stock assessment simplification discussion. The NRCC also requested an update on the NEFOP/PBSP merger at the spring 2026 meeting, an update on IRA, and ECCG. While NRCC members agreed that there are unresolved challenges with the RDM, NRCC ultimately agreed that the relevant NRCC members would discuss this topic separately because the RDM is not used by all members.

Action Item 1 (addition): Dr. Moore suggested that NRCC hold an intersessional meeting to discuss risk-value matrix development, and the NRCC members agreed.

Dr. O'Keefe asked if the NRCC should talk about the vessel baseline restrictions over email. Dr. Moore answered that both Councils are moving forward on this project, and the Councils should provide reports at future Council meetings. Mr. Beal noted that ASMFC doesn't have any updates on this topic, but is happy to listen. Mr. Pentony suggested that the NRCC needs a plan for jointly addressing vessel baselines and asked if NRCC should have an intersessional meeting on this topic. The NRCC decided to keep this as a future meeting topic, but as a lower priority for the spring 2026 meeting.

Dr. Courneane asked if MAFMC could provide the list of the stocks for which they have requested to NEFSC for additional data updates in 2026. MAFMC agreed to provide the list to NRCC.

Dr. McManus asked if there is information on data updates improving the specifications setting process. He asked if new figures or data reformatting would allow improved usability. Dr. Moore suggested pausing the discussion until he can have a conversation with Mr. Muffley. Dr. Simpkins added that NEFSC is working to automate data updates and is available to talk about it further.

The spring 2026 NRCC meeting will be held May 27-28, 2026. Mr. Pentony asked the NRCC members if they would commit to using the full two days scheduled for the spring 2026 meeting, and NRCC agreed. Dr. O'Keefe offered to help with meeting logistics, adding that a finalized location would be helpful. Dr. Hare agreed to provide an update on the venue soon.