



New England Fishery Management Council  
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## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** August 12, 2025  
**TO:** Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC)  
**FROM:** Monkfish Plan Development Team (PDT)  
**SUBJECT:** **Monkfish specifications for FY 2026 – 2028 (default specifications for FY 2029-2030)**

This memorandum forwards information to support recommendations by the Scientific and Statistical Committee for setting the Overfishing Limit and Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for the Monkfish Northern Fishery Management Area (NFMA) and Southern Fishery Management Area (SFMA) for Fishing Years (FY) 2026 - 2030. The SSC has traditionally recommended monkfish specifications at three-year intervals, but recent reductions in federal agency resources have highlighted a potential need for increased flexibility in management and regulatory processes. Thus, rather than recommend specifications for FY 2026-2028, the SSC is asked to make recommendations for a five-year period, considering specifications for FY 2029 and 2030 as defaults should future gaps in federal resources prevent the provision of updated data. It is worth noting that this year’s framework action will only set specifications for FY 2026-2028, however. The Monkfish Plan Development Team (PDT) met by webinar on August 7, 2025 to develop this memo.

### *1. Overview*

Monkfish has been assessed and managed in two areas, northern and southern. This memorandum provides information to support OFL and ABC recommendations for FY 2026 – 2028 (and defaults for FY 2029-2030) by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). To develop recommendations, the PDT reviewed the 2025 data updated provided by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) and the 2022 management track assessment and specification setting information (stock assessment, peer review report, SSC report, and PDT report). Note that the 2016 operational assessment moved from a model-based assessment to an empirical assessment based on commercial data and fishery-independent data (Richards 2016).

The monkfish regulations state: “The Councils or the PDT shall calculate ABC values for each monkfish stock based on the ABC control rule established in the FMP. These calculations shall be reviewed by the SSC, guided by terms of reference developed by the Councils. The SSC shall

either concur with these ABC calculations or provide alternative recommendations for each stock and describe the elements of scientific uncertainty used to develop its recommendations." Failure of the monkfish analytical assessment in 2016 has precluded use of the existing control rule, and index-based assessments have been used to provide catch advice on an interim basis.

Section 2 of this memo provides a brief overview of the 2022 Monkfish Management Track Assessment and FY 2023-2025 specifications. Section 3 summarizes the 2025 NEFSC data update. Section 4 provides potential OFLs and ABCs for SSC consideration for FY 2026-2028 (and defaults for FY 2029-2030). Responses to the SSC recommendations made in 2022 and 2023 during FY 2023-2025 specifications setting are in Section 5.

#### Key Points:

- The PDT recommends that the OFLs for the northern and southern monkfish management areas be unknown.
- The PDT recommends status quo ABCs for the northern and southern monkfish management areas based on the NEFSC data update.

### ***2. 2022 Monkfish Management Track Assessment and FY 2023-2025 Specifications***

The 2022 management track assessment did not include an analytical assessment that could determine absolute biomass or fishing mortality and concluded that the status of monkfish remains unknown. The Ismooth method for setting catch advice is designed to use the trawl survey multiplier applied to recent catch. Given prior monkfish specifications applied the trawl survey multiplier to recent ABCs (instead of recent catch), the Council decided to transition to the intended application of Ismooth when recommending ABCs for FY 2023-2025 using an average of both approaches. This prevented a substantial reduction in catch advice for both monkfish stocks.

### ***3. 2025 NEFSC Data Update***

NEFSC provided a data update in lieu of a management track assessment in 2025. This update included northern and southern monkfish landings and discards through 2024 (landings beginning in 1964 and discards beginning in 1980), bottom trawl survey indices of northern and southern monkfish from 1963 through 2025 (biomass, kg/tow) and stratified mean indices at length for the bottom trawl survey for northern and southern monkfish from 1963 through 2025.

U.S. commercial monkfish landings (aggregate weight) and discards (aggregate weight) are provided in Table 1 for the most recent calendar years. In the north, landings have fluctuated over 2022-2024 while discards have declined; in the south, landings have generally declined over 2022-2024 while discards have fluctuated.

Table 1. U.S. commercial monkfish landings and discards (mt) by management area from 2018 – 2024.

Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update.

Calendar Year	Northern Fishery Management Area		Southern Fishery Management Area	
	Monkfish Landings (mt)	Monkfish Discards (mt)	Monkfish Landings (mt)	Monkfish Discards (mt)
2018	6,009	1,253	4,388	3,476
2019	6,084	1,080	4,373	3,358
2020	5,508	721	2,644	2,263
2021	5,043	788	1,954	2,317
2022	4,900	947	1,818	1,758
2023	5,687	914	1,364	1,634
2024	4,998	886	961	2,134

NMFS spring and fall bottom trawl survey aggregate indices for northern and southern monkfish management areas are provided in Table 2 for the most recent calendar years. In the north, NMFS fall survey index increased by ~0.04 kg/tow in each of the last three years and the spring survey index increased by ~0.75 kg/tow from 2022 to 2024 (missing survey index in 2023) and declined by ~0.2 kg/tow from 2024 to 2025; in the south, NMFS fall survey index marginally decreased over 2021 to 2023 and increased by 0.07 kg/tow from 2023 to 2024 and the spring survey index followed a similar trend during those time periods. Coefficients of variation from 1968 through 2025 and stratified mean indices at length for the spring and fall surveys from 2017 – 2025 are provided in the NEFSC data update documents.

Table 2. Bottom trawl survey spring and fall index (biomass, kg/tow) of northern and southern monkfish from 2018 – 2025. Source: 2025 NEFSC Data Update.

Calendar Year	Northern Fishery Management Area		Southern Fishery Management Area	
	Fall index	Spring index	Fall index	Spring index
2018	2.1099	1.5277	0.2657	0.6615
2019	1.5151	1.1198	0.4706	0.3634
2020				
2021	1.2224	0.9202	0.1322	0.2588
2022	1.2406	0.9460	0.1263	0.1832
2023	1.2865		0.0955	
2024	1.3245	1.6959	0.1655	0.1584
2025		1.5028		0.2162

#### **4. FY 2026-2028 OFLs and ABCs (default specifications for FY 2029-2030)**

##### **Overfishing Limit**

The PDT recommends that the OFLs for the northern and southern monkfish management areas be unknown (Table 3). The lack of an analytical assessment in 2022 precluded the estimation of absolute biomass and a fishing mortality rate. An OFL cannot be calculated without these parameters. The PDT feels that having unknown OFLs is more consistent with the unknown stock status conclusion and that the most recent OFLs that were specified in Framework 12 for FY 2020-2022 are based on an analytical assessment that was invalidated in 2016.

**Table 3. Potential monkfish FY 2026-2028 (defaults for FY 2029-2030) OFLs for SSC consideration.**

<b>Management Area</b>	<b>Status Quo OFL</b>	<b>PDT recommended OFL</b>
Northern	Unknown	Unknown
Southern	Unknown	Unknown

##### **Acceptable Biological Catch**

It is the general practice of PDTs to focus on forwarding ABCs to the SSC that are consistent with the assessment and/or control rule methods. Due to the lack of an analytical assessment, the parameters needed to apply the monkfish ABC control rule are not available, so use of the ABC control rule is not possible. Furthermore, a data update was provided for monkfish in lieu of a management track assessment in 2025, which did not include using the I-Smooth method for setting catch advice.

Applicable across both northern and southern monkfish management areas is that this is the first iteration of data updates for monkfish, and the Monkfish FMP does not currently have guidance on how data updates would be used to change catch advice from existing ABCs. It is also worth noting that status quo ABCs have been in place for the past three fishing years (FY 2023-2025), which were recommended by the SSC, and there are no substantial changes to the catch and survey indices in the data update that indicate the specifications currently in place via the 2022 Monkfish Management Track Assessment are inappropriate (e.g., the trawl survey indices are not substantially out of range from prior years evaluated in the 2022 monkfish assessment). Current monkfish specifications for 2023-2025 fishing years are shown in Table 4 (6,224 mt ABC for the NFMA and 5,861 mt ABC for the SFMA).

The PDT noted concern about the NEFSC Data Update figures for the stratified mean indices at length for the bottom trawl survey and applicability for monkfish. The figures are challenging to interpret and to detect new recruitment events without more robust analysis, though there did not appear to be other information (data and anecdotal information from the fishing industry) to suggest a new year class. The PDT also noted that these mean indices at length are a new data product for data update documents and are less informative for certain species, such as skates, that are known to be long-lived, have low fecundity, and have low catches in the survey. It is not clear whether the figures are less informative for monkfish as well.

**Northern.** The PDT forwards status quo ABC for the northern monkfish management area based on the aforementioned reasons along with the following rationale based on the 2025 NEFSC Data Update:

- The fall bottom trawl survey index shows a slight increase in index values over 2021 – 2024 (range of 1.2224 to 1.3245 kg/tow), while the spring bottom trawl survey index shows a slight increase followed by a larger decrease over 2021 – 2025 (excluding missing survey year 2023; range of 0.9202 to 1.6959 kg/tow).
- Comments about the data update:
  - Proportion of discards relative to commercial landings and the commercial landings appear relatively stable in recent years; commercial monkfish landings range of 4,900 mt to 5,687 over 2022-2024.

**Southern.** The PDT forwards status quo ABC for the southern monkfish management area based on the aforementioned reasons along with the following rationale based on the 2025 NEFSC Data Update and other information:

- The fall bottom trawl survey index shows similar index values over 2021 - 2024 (range of 0.0955 to 0.1655 kg/tow), while the spring bottom trawl survey index shows a slight decrease followed by a slight increase over 2021 – 2025 (excluding missing survey year 2023; range of 0.2588 to 0.1584 kg/tow).
- Southern monkfish landings appear to be driven primarily by market conditions and the presence of skates and interaction with the skate fishery. The 2025 NEFSC Data Update did not include other survey information, namely scallop dredge survey, which was provided in the [2022 Monkfish Management Track Assessment](#); however [Figure 2 of the Monkfish Data Update](#) for the southern region shows that the proportion of discards relative to landings has remained relatively stable in recent years and also shows an overall decline in commercial landings. Based on the FY 2024 year-end catch accounting, there were ~3.4 million pounds of estimated dead discards versus ~1.8 million pounds of commercial landings in the southern monkfish area. Table 10 from the “[Other Fishery Background Data](#)” document shows that the vast majority of monkfish discards in the southern area are from scallop dredge (2.36 million pounds in FY 2023, 2.8 million pounds in FY 2022, and ~4.2 million pounds in FY 2021). Taken together, and in absence of additional scallop survey index, the data suggest that monkfish are available for the commercial monkfish fishery in the southern area given monkfish are being caught in high amounts as bycatch by scallop dredge gear in this area; the lower commercial monkfish landings are likely due to other reasons unrelated to monkfish biomass or lack of the resource. There does not appear to be justification for an increase nor a decrease in ABC for the southern monkfish stock.
- Other comments to consider:
  - Regarding the magnitude of monkfish discards in scallop fishery in the near future, scallop fishing effort in the Mid-Atlantic region is likely to be minimal in FY 2026 with a possible minor increase in 2027 reflecting scallop biomass and growth. There is also an expectation that the longer-term trend of scallop effort will continue to shift away from the southern Mid-Atlantic and towards Georges Bank. These anticipated trends for scallop fishing effort indicate minimal unforeseen mortality for southern monkfish, assuming average recruitment. More detailed information on trends in scallop effort and allocations can be found in

[Scallop Framework 39](#) (Section 5.6.1.2) and the [Scallop Strategic Plan Visioning Session document](#).

**Table 4. Potential monkfish FY 2026-2028 (default specifications for FY 2029 – 2030) ABCs for SSC consideration.**

Management Area	Status Quo ABC	PDT recommended ABC
Northern	6,224 mt	6,224 mt
Southern	5,861 mt	5,861 mt

Default Values for FY 2029-2030

The SSC has traditionally recommended monkfish specifications at three-year intervals, but recent reductions in federal agency resources have highlighted a potential need for increased flexibility in management and regulatory processes. Thus, the SSC is being asked to consider specifications for FY 2029-2030 as defaults should future gaps in federal resources prevent the provision of updated data.

The PDT recommends setting default ABCs for FY 2029-2030 at the status quo levels set for FY 2026-2028 (6,224mt for Northern and 5,861 mt for Southern). This approach would be consistent with existing monkfish regulations regarding rollover specifications:

*"If the effective date of a final rule to implement the recommended measures falls after the start of the fishing year, fishing may continue under the existing regulations, but any DAS used by a vessel on or after the start of a fishing year shall be counted against any DAS allocation the vessel ultimately receives for that fishing year ([50 CFR 648.96\(a\)\(3\)\(iv\)](#))."*

Other fishery management plans have measures that would lower the ABC until replaced by new specifications, but to varying degrees. The Council is currently developing an omnibus amendment to consider increased consistency in management and regulatory processes and flexibility to adjust with available resources. That action includes an alternative that would create rollover provisions for all FMPs. The Council expects to take final action on this amendment in September 2025.

The PDT discussed a precautionary approach for default specifications for FY 2029-2030, namely a reduction in ABCs from FY 2026-2028 given the uncertainty in future years, however the PDT recommends status quo ABC for the default years, consistent with existing regulations.

## **5. Responses to 2023 SSC Recommendations**

In [November 2022](#) and [January 2023](#) (SSC remand), when recommending OFLs and ABCs for FY 2023-2025, the SSC made several other recommendations; only Recommendations #4 and #5 are pertinent to this year's specifications setting. The PDT responses are included below for those recommendations.

SSC Recommendation #4. The SSC recommends that alternative assessment methods for monkfish should be investigated in the next assessment iteration.

SSC Recommendation #5. The SSC recommends consideration of additional survey indices, analyses of differences in survey indices, and swept-area biomass estimates derived from survey indices be analyzed.

PDT Response to Recommendations #4 and #5: Unfortunately, alternative assessment methods and consideration of additional survey indices and swept-area biomass estimates, etc. have not been evaluated for monkfish. The 2025 Monkfish Management Track Assessment was cancelled, and the 2027 Monkfish Research Track Assessment has been paused, both of which are due to a change in NEFSC resource and staffing availability. It is unclear what resources may become available in the future for exploring alternative assessment methods and for considering additional survey indices.

## **6. References**

Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) (2025). 2025 Data Update: Northern Stock of Monkfish, *Lophius americanus*. 1 – 14 p.

NEFSC (2025). 2025 Data Update: Southern Stock of Monkfish, *Lophius americanus*. 1 – 14 p.

Richards R.A. (2016). 2016 Monkfish Operational Assessment. Woods Hole, MA: U.S. Department of Commerce. NEFSC Reference Document 16-09. 109 p.