

FW24/49 - Modification of Georges Bank access area seasonal restrictions

No Action GB access area seasonal restrictions – closure from Feb. 1 – June 14

The access areas in Closed Area I, Closed Area II, and Nantucket Lightship would remain closed to scallop fishing from February 1 through June 14. Any access area trips in those three areas would be restricted to take place between June 15 and January 31.

Modify GB access area seasonal restrictions

Two primary sources of analysis helped develop the options in this section. The first source of information is an analysis the Scallop PDT completed using observer data in and around access areas on GB. A generalized linear model (GLM) was developed to estimate bycatch rates by month using observer data from months the access areas have been open and modeling the bycatch rates for months the areas have been closed using data observer data from surrounding open areas.

The second source of information is based on results from a 2011 RSA project titled, “*Optimizing the Georges Bank Scallop Fishery by Maximizing Meat Yield and Minimizing Bycatch.*” Fourteen research trips were conducted in both Closed Area I and II from October 2010 through April 2012. Seasonal variations in scallop meat weights and YT flounder bycatch rates were evaluated. The Research Steering Committee reviewed the methods and results for this final report submitted in June 2012 and deemed it sufficient for the PDTs to use in developing management measures, even though additional data will be collected over the next year.

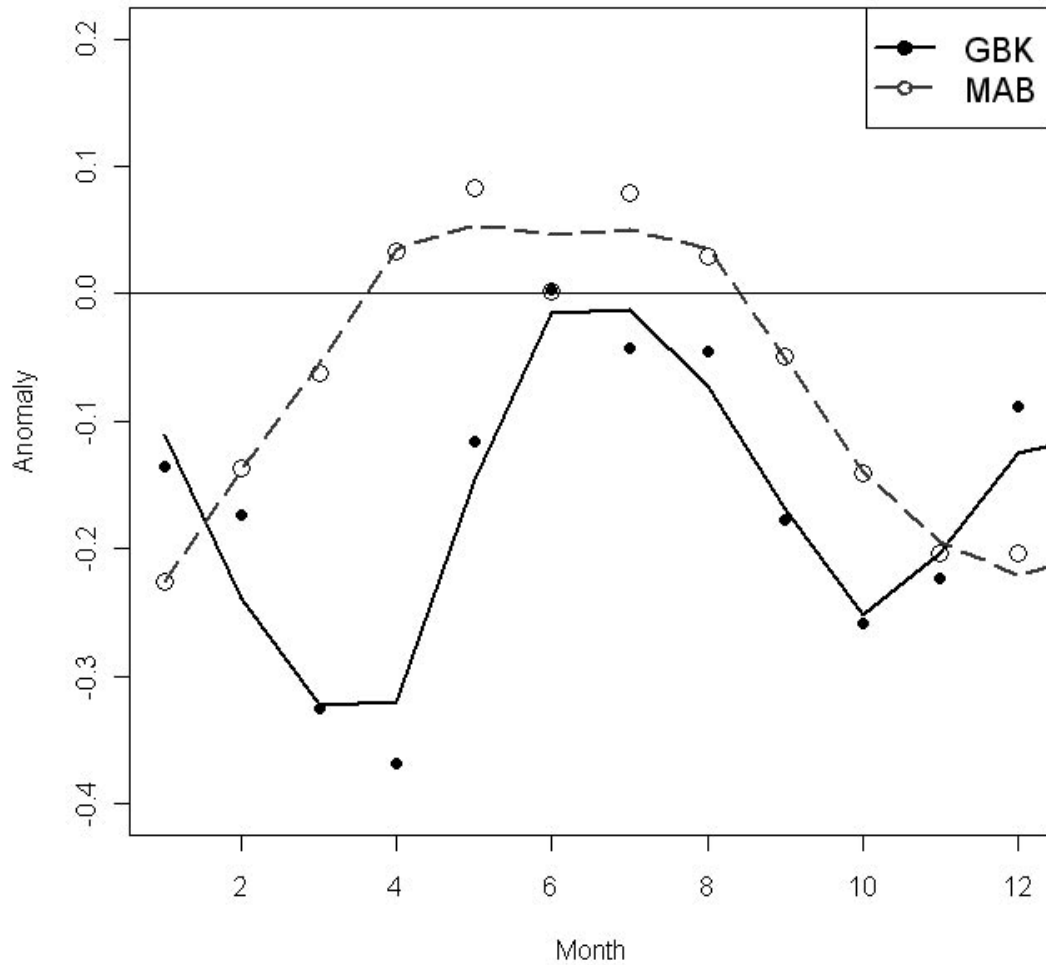
Option 1 - Closure period would be modified to provide access during months with highest scallop meat weights to reduce fishing time and scallop fishing mortality

The Scallop PDT reviewed the observer and RSA monthly bycatch data and recommends that one alternative be considered that is primarily based on scallop meat weight variations. The month with the highest meat weights on GB is typically June, and the lowest is October (**Figure 1**). The average meat weights are about 20% greater in June than in October (See Section ??? for more information about scallop meat weight variation by season).

Since there is a possession limit for access area trips vessels are limited to a specific poundage per trip. Therefore, the greater the meat weight per animal the fewer scallops will be harvested and reduce fishing time compared to fishing when scallop meats weights are less. This translates into less potential bycatch and lower scallop fishing mortality compared to months with lower scallop meat weights in the fall and winter and higher YT bycatch rates in the fall.

The PDT recommends this alternative close all three access areas from September 1 – April 30. The areas would be closed for 8 and open for 4. All three access areas would have the same schedule.

Figure 1 – Scallop shell height: meat weight anomaly for GB and MA (Hennen and Hart, *In press*)



Option 2 - Closure period would be modified to only the months with highest yellowtail flounder bycatch

The Scallop PDT reviewed the observer and RSA monthly bycatch data and recommends that one alternative be considered that would only close the areas during the time of year with highest YT bycatch rates and presence of YT. Looking at both sources of data, the months when YT bycatch rates are highest are September – December (See section ??? for a summary of the monthly bycatch rate information).

The PDT recommends this alternative close all three access areas from Sept. 1 – Dec. 31.

Option 3a - Closure period would take into account scallop meat weights, YT bycatch, and traditional fishing trends (Scallop Cmte replaced this option with 3B at the September Committee meeting – but the PDT is requesting that this modified option be reconsidered)

The Scallop PDT also discussed that it could be beneficial to consider an alternative that is based on the months when meat weights are poor, YT bycatch is high, and also takes into account traditional fishing trends. Specifically, this alternative would close the areas consistent with Option 2 when YT bycatch rates are highest, but it would be more restrictive to also limit fishing when scallop meats are poor to reduce scallop fishing mortality. Finally, this alternative would also provide for a very limited amount of fishing in the winter when some vessels traditionally take a “Christmas trip”.

The Scallop PDT considered GF PDT input on this issue when designing this option. Specifically, the GF PDT commented that for CA2 the months of May, June and July appear to be the months most likely to minimize catches of YT and WP. For YTF, the months of August – November should be avoided to reduce catches of YTF. For WINP, the months of March and April should be avoided. In terms of YT spawning, the months of May and June should be avoided; but to date there has been no research on the impacts of fishing activity on YT spawning and no research available that identifies specific spawning locations.

The PDT recommends that this alternative close all three access areas from March 1-April 30, September 1-November 30, and again from January 1-February 28/29. That would leave the areas open from May 1 – August 31 and again for the month of December. Overall the areas would be closed for 7 months and open for 5.

Option 3b – Advisory Panel recommendation

Based on an AP recommendation, the Committee revised one of the GB seasonal closure alternatives so that only CA2 would be closed from Aug15-Nov15 and no closures for CA1 and NL. The main rationale provided from the AP meeting was that overall bycatch is low in CA1 and there does not seem to be a strong seasonal difference. For NL the bycatch rates of SNE/MA YT are not as high in the access area compared to other areas farther west (south of Long Island). Therefore, imposing a seasonal restriction may not do much and could actually shift effort into higher bycatch areas if vessels fish in open areas when NL is closed. Based on input from the monthly bycatch program in CA2 it was explained that there are areas outside of CA2 (to the south and west) that have high bycatch of YT in June and July, but then fish seem to move on the bank in late summer and fall (in Closed Area 2). It should be noted that WP flounder bycatch is highest in CA2 between Jan-March. Therefore, overall for CA2, the Aug15-Nov15 season is a combination of the lowest meat weights and highest YT bycatch.

This option would only have a seasonal restriction for Closed Area II from August 15-November 15; the other two access areas on GB would be open year round.

Eliminate GB access area seasonal restrictions

This alternative would remove any seasonal restriction for scallop fishing in portions of the existing GF closed areas. This alternative may be selected if it is found that limited scallop fishing in portions of the GF closed areas year round would not have substantial negative impacts on groundfish mortality and spawning.

The current seasonal closures have been in place since 1999, the first year the scallop fishery was granted access into Closed Area II. Framework 11 ultimately prohibited scallop fishing from February 1 through June 14 to avoid disrupting spawning aggregations of overfished groundfish stocks that spawn primarily during the spring and early summer months.

Table 1 – Summary of GB Access Area seasonal restriction alternatives under consideration in FW24

Access Area	No Action	Modify Season					Eliminate Season
		Option 1	Option 2	Option 3A**	Option 3B		
	All areas	All areas	All areas	All areas	CA2	CA1/NL	All Areas
Mar	C	C	O	C	O	O	O
Apr	C	C	O	C	O	O	O
May	C	O	O	O	O	O	O
Jun	O (6/15)	O	O	O	O	O	O
Jul	O	O	O	O	O	O	O
Aug	O	O	O	O	C (Aug 15)	O	O
Sep	O	C	C	C	C	O	O
Oct	O	C	C	C	C	O	O
Nov	O	C	C	C	C (Nov 15)	O	O
Dec	O	C	O	O	O	O	O
Jan	O	C	O	C	O	O	O
Feb	C	C	O	C	O	O	O
Total Months Closed	4.5	8	3	7	3	0	0

** Scallop Cmte replaced Option 3A with 3B, but Scallop PDT wants Committee to reconsider or develop a different alternative that is similar