



# *New England Fishery Management Council*

## *News Release*

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### ***Council Moves Draft Habitat Protection Rules Forward for Public Review***

Danvers, MA Meeting this week on February 25-26, the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) took another step in the process to develop fishery measures that would protect important marine habitats in the Northeast. Most significantly, the NEFMC identified its “preferred alternatives” among a wider range of proposals that have been developed as part of Draft Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2. Preferred alternatives are not binding on the Council when final decisions are made, but are intended to give the public an idea of the direction in which a majority of its members are leaning at the time. The amendment would modify all of the Council’s fishery management plans.

Over the two days, the Council examined alternatives and options that ranged from the status quo, to opening areas currently closed to fishing, to requirements for gear restrictions in places with sensitive bottom types. It also added new packages of measures that were brought to the meeting by both fishing and environmental interests.

The Habitat Amendment is being developed by the NEFMC to identify fishery measures that would protect, conserve, and enhance essential fish habitat for the species managed by the 18-member Council. These would include stocks of groundfish (cod, haddock, pollock and several flounders), sea scallops, monkfish, Atlantic herring, hakes/whiting species and skates, among other species.

The management measures are designed to: 1.) protect essential fish habitat; 2.) improve protection for spawning groundfish to enhance the productivity of those stocks; and 3.) define specific habitat research areas. They would address locations in the Gulf of Maine, on Georges Bank and locations south and east of Cape Cod --- the Great South Channel and Southern New England.

Commercial and recreational fishermen alike could be affected by the proposed measures, depending on the Council’s final decisions. The proposed closure of a 55-square nautical mile “reference area” located within a larger 342-square nautical mile Dedicated Habitat Research Area close to Stellwagen Bank, could exclude all groundfish fishing, whether commercial or recreational, to allow for comparative research studies to be conducted. It will remain in the draft amendment through the public review and hearing process.

Final decision-making will be scheduled once public hearings have been convened and after the comment period for the action has closed. This will likely occur this fall. If the process goes according to plan, new habitat measures would be in place by the summer of 2015. Once the NEFMC has taken action, it will forward the amendment and its associated Environmental Impact Statement to NOAA Fisheries and the Secretary of Commerce for their consideration and approval. NOAA Fisheries will publish the final regulations.

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