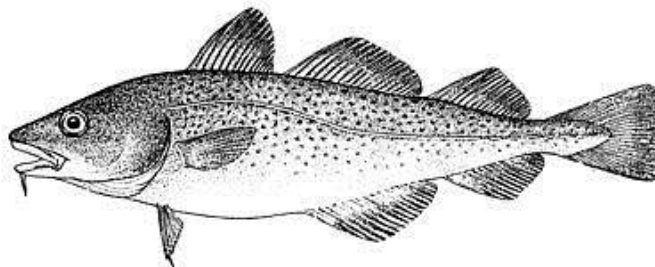


SCOPING DOCUMENT
for
Amendment 23
to the
Northeast Multispecies
Fishery Management Plan



(Groundfish Monitoring Amendment)

Prepared by the
New England Fishery Management Council

Schedule of Northeast Multispecies Amendment 23 Scoping Meetings

The Council is scheduling six scoping meetings, including one webinar, for this amendment (see below).

<u>Date and Time</u>	<u>Location</u>
Friday, March 3, 2017 9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.	Maine Fishermen’s Forum Samoset Resort Hotel 220 Warrenton Street Rockport, ME 04856 (207) 594-2511
Tuesday March 14, 2017 6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.	Webinar Hearing Register to participate: https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/4567763108442151939 Call in info: Toll: +1 (415) 930-5321 Access Code: 702-360-151
Tuesday, March 21, 2017 2:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.	Portsmouth Library 175 Parrot Avenue Portsmouth, NH 03801 (603) 427-1540
Tuesday, March 21, 2017 6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.	NOAA Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office 55 Great Republic Drive Gloucester, MA 01930 (978) 281-9300
Wednesday, March 22, 2017 6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.	Hilton Garden Inn 4 Home Deport Drive Plymouth, MA 02360 (508) 830-0200
Thursday, March 23, 2017 6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.	Hilton Garden Inn 224 Gold Star Highway Groton, CT 06340 (860) 445-6800

You may attend any of the above scoping meetings to provide oral comments, or you may submit written comments on Amendment 23 by:

- Fax: (978) 465-3116;
- Email: comments@nefmc.org
- Mail at the address below.

Thomas A. Nies, Executive Director
New England Fishery Management Council
50 Water Street, Mill #2
Newburyport, MA 01950

The comment deadline is 5 p.m. EST, Monday, April 3, 2017.

Please note on your correspondence; “Northeast Multispecies Amendment 23 Scoping Comments.”



NEW ENGLAND FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL
SEEKS YOUR COMMENTS ON THE MANAGEMENT OF THE
NORTHEAST MULTISPECIES (GROUND FISH) FISHERY

***Your comments
are invited***

The New England Fishery Management Council (Council) is initiating the development of an amendment to the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Northeast Multispecies (Groundfish) under the authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA).

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Council may prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that will analyze the impacts of this amendment (Amendment 23) on the affected biological, physical, and human environment.

This scoping document is to inform you of the Council's intent to gather information necessary for the preparation of the EIS and ask for your specific suggestions and input on the range of alternatives that should be considered in Amendment 23 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP.

***Why is the
Council
proposing to
take action?***

The Council is proposing to consider changes to the groundfish monitoring and reporting system to ensure it is providing accurate catch information necessary to manage the fishery efficiently.

The Northeast multispecies fishery targets 13 species comprising 20 stocks along the east coast from Maine to Cape Hatteras, NC, although most fishing activity takes place between Maine and New Jersey. Management measures were first adopted in 1977, but there have been several major revisions to the management program over the following decades.

The most recent major change occurred in 2010, when most of the fishery shifted to a system that controls total catches through explicit limits on catches by organized cooperative groups of fishermen, referred to as sectors. Each sector comprises a group of fishing permits, each with its own landings history that contributes to the allocation for all of the groundfish stocks. The sum of the allocation histories from all of the permits in the sector represents the sector's annual quota. A sector is not subject to effort controls such as trip limits, and may choose how to manage its collective quota among its members. However, in exchange for this increased business flexibility, sectors are responsible for increased monitoring requirements to comply with catch limits. About 95 percent of the catch is taken by vessels in sectors, while the remainder is harvested by vessels in the common pool. In contrast to sectors, common pool vessels operate independently and are subject to effort controls that include trip limits, limits on days fishing, and closed areas.

Why is the Council proposing to take action (cont.)?

Successful management of the Northeast multispecies fishery depends on accurate and timely reports of catch. The term “catch” refers to fish that are landed, as well as those that may not be landed but are discarded at sea for any reason. Catch data are used to ensure compliance with catch limits and are also a key component of scientific assessments of the status of the stocks. These assessments are the basis for determining how much fish can be sustainably caught in future years. Catch is a key element of data commonly referred to as “fishery dependent data” – that is, data collected as a result of fishing operations. At present, there are three primary sources of catch data: 1) self-reported data from fishing vessels and fish dealers; 2) data collected by third-party at-sea observers; and 3) vessel position data.

The self-reported data from fishing vessels and dealers is recorded on Vessel Trip Reports (VTRs) and dealer reports. Fishermen use VTRs to report information on trip-level fishing activity. In these reports, vessel operators submit information on trip start and end times, species landed, species discarded, locations of fishing activity, gear used, disposition of species landed, and similar activity. Fishermen may complete VTRs on paper or using electronic, computer-based programs. Fish are sold to a licensed dealer who submits information via dealer reports that detail the species and amount purchased, sale prices, selling vessel, and market category, and which are filed electronically.

While VTRs and dealer reports are generally used to determine landing amounts, estimates of fish discarded at sea are provided by at-sea observers. There are currently two types of at-sea observers employed in this fishery: Northeast Fishery Observer Program (NEFOP) observers, and at-sea monitors (ASM). Although both programs collect similar information (trip activity, species landed, discarded, gear used, etc.), NEFOP observers are funded by the federal government and implement federal programs (Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology (SBRM), Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), Endangered Species Act (ESA)) across fisheries, while at-sea monitors are partly funded by fishermen and will be fully funded by fishermen in 2017, and are specific to sector monitoring.

At-sea observers are not present on all trips. Coverage levels for both programs are set annually by the National Marine Fisheries Service. NEFOP coverage levels are determined using the Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology (see www.nefsc.noaa.gov/femad/fsb/SBRM/). ASM levels are determined consistent with procedures established by the FMP. This action will not modify the SBRM, but could modify how coverage levels are determined for the at-sea monitoring program. It could also modify or remove the at-sea monitoring program as part of a holistic monitoring and reporting program for the groundfish fishery.

Lastly, vessel position data is provided through a Vessel Monitoring System (VMS). This data stream provides vessel positions about once each hour using a satellite-based tracking system and can be used to report fishing activity (such as

changing a trip type) while at sea and to enforce compliance with time and area closures.

Why is the Council proposing to take action (cont.)?

What actions have already been taken?

Framework Adjustment 55 (FW 55) clarified that the primary goal of the groundfish sector at-sea monitoring program is to verify area fished, catch, and discards by species, by gear type, and that this primary goal should be met in the most cost effective manner practicable. All other goals and objectives of groundfish monitoring programs are considered equally-weighted, secondary goals. These goals include to 1) improve the documentation of catch, 2) reduce cost of monitoring, 3) incentivize reducing discards, 4) provide additional data streams for stock assessments, 5) enhance safety of monitoring program, and 6) perform periodic review of monitoring program effectiveness. Specific objectives are described in detail in FW 55. The Council may change the goals and/or objectives of the at-sea monitoring program in this action.

At its September 2016 meeting, the Council passed the following motion regarding the 2017 groundfish management priorities:

That the Council direct staff to prepare, for review at the November Council meeting, a draft scoping Federal Register notice for an amendment to the Groundfish FMP to adjust the groundfish monitoring program to improve reliability and accountability.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of Amendment 23 is to adjust the groundfish monitoring program to improve reliability and accountability. In recent years, most Council discussions have focused on at-sea observer coverage because it provides the highest quality data, but it is expensive, and given the current low quotas in the fishery, the expense of at-sea monitoring is difficult for many fishermen to afford. There are also questions about the accurate representation of the information, since there is evidence that fishing behavior may be different on observed and unobserved trips. For these reasons, the Council may explore alternatives to at-sea observers, and may consider changes to any part of the monitoring and reporting system for groundfish.

Addressing this purpose and need requires the development of an amendment to the Northeast Multispecies FMP to fully consider and analyze an appropriate range of management alternatives for changing the monitoring and reporting system. The Council is seeking comments and input from the public on this specific issue.

What action is the Council considering?

The Council will consider changes to the groundfish monitoring program to address the purpose and need of Amendment 23 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP.

This could include a wide range of alternatives to tracking sector/vessel specific discards, such as setting total allowable landings and monitoring fishery-wide discards through the observer program. These changes may include alternatives to at-sea observers, such as using cameras to monitor fishing activity, which is usually referred to as Electronic Monitoring, or EM. The Council may also consider changes to the way landings information is provided by both dealers and vessel operators and how it is assigned to stock areas. When developing this amendment, the Council will take into account other regional projects to improve catch monitoring, such as the Fishery Dependent Data Visioning project that NMFS is pursuing. In summary, the Council may consider changes to any part of the system used to collect and report commercial catch information in the Northeast multispecies fishery.

Why should I comment?

The scoping process is an extremely important part of the amendment development process. This is the first and best opportunity for members of the public to raise issues and concerns for the Council to consider during the development of Amendment 23 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP. The Council needs your input to identify important issues and develop a complete range of alternatives that meet the purpose and need for this amendment. Your comments early in the amendment development process will help the Council address your concerns more thoroughly and ensure that an adequate range of alternatives is considered to address this important issue.

What should my comments address?

Management measures developed by the Council and implemented by NMFS must comply with all applicable Federal laws and Executive Orders. In particular, management measures must comply with ten National Standards specified in the MSA. During the Amendment 23 scoping process, the Council is particularly seeking comments regarding how to develop alternatives for changing the groundfish monitoring and reporting system. While your comments may address any aspect of the purpose and need for this action, the Council is seeking your input on the following:

- What alternatives should the Council consider in Amendment 23 to change the groundfish monitoring program?
- What specific issues are most important when evaluating the tradeoffs associated with monitoring discards at sea using at-sea monitors?
- Should the Council consider changes to the way landings information for groundfish is provided?

What is the process?

The Council, its Groundfish Committee, Groundfish Advisory Panel, and Groundfish PDT have held preliminary public discussions on the purpose and need for Amendment 23 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP and the range of alternatives that may be considered/analyzed. The publication of this scoping document and an announcement in the *Federal Register* of the Council's intent to consider management measures for the Northeast Multispecies fishery is the first part of the formal Amendment 23 process. Public comment will be accepted during February and March 2017, and six scoping hearings for Amendment 23 will be held to provide additional opportunity for input from the public (see meeting dates and locations on the back of the cover page).

After information is gathered through the Amendment 23 scoping process, goals/objectives and a range of alternatives will be developed by the Groundfish Committee, with input from the Groundfish Advisory Panel, Groundfish PDT, and SSC, through a series of public meetings during 2017.

***What is the process?
(cont.)***

Once all input and guidance has been considered and a range of alternatives has been developed by the Council for further consideration (late 2017/early 2018), the impacts of the alternatives will be analyzed by the Groundfish PDT, and a Draft EIS for Amendment 23 may be published and sent out for public review and comment. At that time (mid-2018), the public will have more specific alternatives and analyses on which to comment. Following a review of comments received on the Amendment 23 Draft EIS, the Council will choose final management measures to submit to the Secretary of Commerce for implementation. If no further delays are encountered, Amendment 23 would become effective by the 2019 fishing year.

How do I comment?

The Council is scheduling six scoping meetings, including one webinar, for this amendment (see location and dates of meetings on the back of the cover page). You may attend any of the Amendment 23 scoping meetings to provide oral comments, or you may submit comments by email to comments@nefmc.org, or written comments by 5 p.m. EST, Monday, April 3, 2017:

Thomas A. Nies, Executive Director
New England Fishery Management Council
50 Water Street, Mill #2
Newburyport, MA 01950
Fax: (978) 465-3116

Please note on your correspondence; “Northeast Multispecies Amendment 23 Scoping Comments.” Comments may also be accepted via fax at the above fax number.

If you wish to be on the mailing list for future meetings of Groundfish Committee, please contact the Council office at 978-465-0492.
