



New England Fishery Management Council News Release

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NEFMC Completes Work on Habitat Amendment with Some Measures to be Finalized in June

Mystic, CT The New England Fishery Management Council largely completed its task this week to take final action on a plan to revise its fishery habitat protection rules currently in place in federal waters from Maine to Connecticut.

On April 22-23, the Council voted on a range of habitat-related issues. Its members voted to revise a number of its essential fish habitat (EFH) designations for the species the Council manages and added to its existing list of Habitat Areas of Particular Concern. Otherwise known as HAPCs, these areas are not subject to gear or other restrictions, but are singled out because they encompass ecologically important and sensitive habitats that should receive careful consideration for conservation purposes. With some modifications to the overlapping habitat management areas, the status quo level of protection was retained in an area known as the Cashes Ledge Groundfish Closure Area, which is located about 80 miles off the coast of Maine and is well-known for its biodiversity and unique range of habitats.

If NOAA Fisheries approves the Council's proposed measures, special status also will be conferred on an area of Cashes Ledge known as Ammen Rock, the highest underwater feature in the Gulf of Maine, on which no fishing gear except lobster pots will be allowed. A nearby habitat protected area known as Jeffreys Bank was reconfigured to better encompass shallow hard bottom habitats.

Habitat protection in the Western Gulf of Maine Closure Area, located off the coasts of New Hampshire and Massachusetts, also will remain largely the same as is currently delineated. Mobile gear that is commonly used to fish on or near the seabed for groundfish and shellfish will not be allowed in the defined area. The Council proposed to open an area to the east of the Western Gulf of Maine habitat area, which will allow fishermen to target healthy fish stocks, as pollock and redfish in deeper waters off Jeffreys Ledge.

Seeking to encourage scientific research, the New England Council identified two areas that will be dedicated to those types of activities, an area on Stellwagen Bank off the Massachusetts coast, and another on Georges Bank. A measure to establish a no fishing "reference area" within the overall research area on Stellwagen Bank was not approved.

Several complicated sets of habitat protection measures that would apply to Georges Bank were considered as well. A new configuration, presented by fishing interests for the first time yesterday morning, would allow fishing in formerly closed areas (including an opening that would allow access to a scallop-rich area), but also proposed other areas that would provide habitat protection. After lengthy discussion, the Council agreed that this proposal will be analyzed between now and the Council's June 16-18 meeting in Newport, RI and considered then.

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Again, trying to strike a balance between habitat protection and the continuation of fishing, including consideration for the economically successful surf clam industry, the Council approved a large new area east of Nantucket (the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area) for targeted habitat protection. The northeast corner of the area will be closed to all dredges and bottom trawls. The remainder of the area is closed to bottom trawls and scallop dredges, but allows an exemption for hydraulic clam dredges for one year only, at which point the Council may adopt a different program for surf clam vessels to access portions of the habitat area.

Finally, the Council added another new habitat area. This one, known as Cox Ledge, is located south of Rhode Island. Mobile gear used by trawlers would be required to operate with modified fishing gear. Hydraulic clam dredges would be prohibited.

Ending its business at this meeting, the Council approved a review process that would help it evaluate the effectiveness of the changes made through this omnibus amendment, in addition to the restrictions imposed in other locations.

The New England Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional organizations established by federal legislation in 1976, is charged with conserving and managing fishery resources from three to 200 miles off the coasts of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut.