



## New England Fishery Management Council

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## MEETING SUMMARY

### **Habitat Plan Development Team**

October 23, 2018

Hilton Garden Inn Boston Logan

100 Boardman St. Boston, MA

The Habitat PDT met to discuss the Clam Dredge Framework, which considers hydraulic clam dredge access to the Great South Channel Habitat Management Area (HMA).

#### ***Meeting attendance***

PDT members included Michelle Bachman (Chair), Jessica Coakley, Geret DePiper, Rachel Feeney, Marianne Ferguson, Kathryn Ford, Julia Livermore, Doug Potts, David Stevenson, and Page Valentine (via webinar).

Audience members included Chad Brayton, Chris Shriver, Allen Rencurrel, Monte Rome, Louis Legace, Tom Hoff, Peter Hughes, Domenic Santoro, and Bill Silkes.

#### ***Development of advice to Habitat Committee on Clam Dredge Framework***

The sole topic of discussion was the clam framework. The PDT was tasked by the Committee and the Council to develop and evaluate a range of potential exemption alternatives. The PDT's advice will be packaged as a memo to the Habitat Committee. The draft memo provided to PDT members included three sections: (1) overarching assumptions and available sources of information, (2) description of the nine sub-areas within the GSC HMA, and (3) suggested management alternatives. The final memo will be provided as a briefing document to support the November 7, 2018 Habitat Committee meeting. Detailed findings will be included in that document, and not within this summary. Below are some key points from the PDT's discussions.

In the first section, the PDT agreed it would be helpful to review language from Omnibus Habitat Amendment 2, the agency's record of decision, and the final rule. The PDT suggested clarifying the habitat vs. spawning protection benefits of seasonal closures. The group also discussed going back to the fishing impacts literature and reiterating that we have information about clam dredge use in sand but not cobble habitats. This included a discussion of what we know about habitat feature recovery rates and whether these are likely to be shorter in the GSC HMA relative to other locations owing to the highly dynamic nature of the seabed in this area and the likelihood that species are expected to be more disturbance adapted. The PDT agreed that additional dedicated research to describe and understand gear impacts on habitat within the

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HMA would be useful but cautioned against expecting too much from such research in terms of how it would influence the outcomes of future actions.

Related to the second section of the memo, the PDT discussed how to describe habitat, clam resource, and fishery attributes for the various sub-areas under consideration for exemption. In terms of habitat characteristics, the PDT agreed it would be helpful to describe shear stress in the HMA but questioned the value of describing seabed forms in the various sub-areas if we don't have a clear sense of how these forms (depressions, flats, etc.) correspond with other features of interest). The team observed that overlays between benthic features and seabed forms might better show this relationship than a standalone description of seabed form in each area. The group agreed the stability information was important. The HMA is comprised of sand and sand-gravel habitats (gravel = pebbles, cobbles, boulders), where sands are likely to be mobile at least somewhat independent of other size fractions that may be more stable at observed flow rates. The 2012 Harris et al. study referenced previously uses the dominant sediment observed at each station to characterize stability, vs. assuming independence of movement among size fractions.

The PDT discussed that the absence of clam shell in a location might not definitively confirm the area was only colonized recently. In addition, there may be issues related to the changing environment or genetics (i.e., presence of more than one surfclam species) which could be affecting clams present in this region, that are not yet well understood.

In terms of fishery information, the PDT debated normalizing catches by the size of the area; on the one hand this would show the value of creating an exemption an area in a slightly different way, but at the risk of overly complicating the presentation of information to the Committee. In the end it may be useful to provide this sort of information if it helps the Committee isolate the most critical areas of the HMA to designate as exemptions, vs. those areas that are less valuable in either total magnitude or per unit area terms. The PDT reviewed charts of 5- vs. 60-minute vessel monitoring system polls from three recent trips, and industry members present provided some insights into typical fishing practices and how they vary among individuals. The driving factor in their fishing behavior is maintenance of catch rates, measured in cages per hour.

Finally, the team discussed how to describe and package alternatives. Most members agreed that it made the most sense to present a no action alternative, a non-rotational alternative, and a rotational alternative. The team struggled to define three rotational groupings, but in the end agreed that it was important to include both seasonal and year-round areas in each group, at a range of depths, and to attempt to balance either revenue or hours fished amongst the three sets of areas. The PDT did not identify subsets of the nine areas to recommend as different packages or sub-options for a non-rotational alternative. However, the group discussed that the information in the second section of the memo could be used by the Committee to identify a subset of the areas for consideration. Any specific groupings of areas or boundary adjustments identified by the Habitat Committee can then be evaluated prior to the December Council meeting.

For both rotational and non-rotational alternatives, the PDT retained the seasonal vs. year-round exemption recommendations for each sub-area developed previously by the Committee and Council. Specifically, McBlair, Rose and Crown, A, B, and D were identified as potential year-round areas, while East Door, Old South, C, and E would be seasonal. However, the PDT

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discussed that a different seasonal closure window might be more appropriate for minimizing impacts on cod spawning activity.

The PDT discussed the merits of including a research program as part of each of these alternatives, vs. as a stand-alone recommendation that the Council could make in addition to any of them. It seems less complicated to separate the research agenda from the exemption area proposals, and the group ultimately decided to structure their recommendations this way. However, some members observed that coupling exemption areas with a research program and intent to revisit the exemptions at a certain time might improve approvability of an exemption alternative. Related to this, the PDT discussed and did not reach a common understanding of the flexibility of the Council to designate exemptions they deemed practicable but that would not be considered as having adverse effects on habitat within the HMA.

Finally, the team discussed the mussel dredge fishery and potential exemptions for mussel dredge gear in the GSC HMA. This included a review of recent fishery landings, as well as some discussion of the likely magnitude of effort in the HMA, including the potential for expansion of the fishery. Mussel dredge exemptions will be drafted as a fourth alternative for Committee consideration.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 4:00 p.m.