Introduction

In December 2020, the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) adopted an Aquaculture Policy, which identifies Council concerns and recommendations related to siting, habitat and biological resource impacts, and effects on fishing activities. To support development of the policy, NEFMC wrote a complementary background document, which summarizes aquaculture activities in New England, state and federal permitting and environmental review processes, and the environmental effects of aquaculture. During the fall of 2020, NEFMC staff participated in two project-specific pre-application meetings, and the Council sent written comments on both projects and on the NOAA Fisheries Aquaculture Opportunity Area Request for Information.

In 2021 and beyond, NEFMC wishes to build upon these efforts and continue to engage with regional partners, including NOAA Fisheries, on aquaculture planning and development. The purpose of this coordinating planning document is to outline specific activities the Council can undertake, in coordination with partner organizations. This plan is expected to evolve over time, as the Council gains experience and expertise, and as aquaculture activities, planning, and governance evolve. The intent is to focus on aquaculture in federal waters that affect NEFMC-managed resources and fisheries, although this does not preclude Council engagement in state waters projects that present fisheries or Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) concerns.

Relevant groups

Council: The full New England Fishery Management Council, which meets five times per year.

- **Habitat Committee**: The Habitat Committee coordinates development of fishery management measures related to habitat, but also serves as a focal point for discussion of the effects of non-fishing activities on fishery resources, habitats, and fisheries. These activities include offshore energy development, mostly wind energy development, and more recently, aquaculture. There is one member from NOAA Fisheries GARFO Habitat and Ecosystem Services Division and two members from the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council.

- **Habitat Advisory Panel (AP)**: The Habitat AP includes diverse members who work in fisheries advocacy, environmental conservation, offshore wind, and for the federal government (Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary Staff). At least one member must have expertise on recreational fisheries issues. Multiple current AP members are knowledgeable about Mid-Atlantic fisheries. Many participate in fisheries and offshore wind initiatives and some are knowledgeable about aquaculture issues. Recent meetings have been held jointly with the Habitat Committee to facilitate an exchange of information between the two groups.

- **Habitat Plan Development Team (PDT)**: The Habitat PDT includes members from both state and federal agencies who have job responsibilities and expertise related to aquaculture development.

- **Council staff**: The Executive Director as well as habitat staff are involved in aquaculture issues and participated in pre-application interagency meetings last year. Habitat staff chair the
Habitat Plan Development Team and draft correspondence related to aquaculture issues; staff also coordinated preparation of the Aquaculture Policy and background document.

**NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Office Habitat and Ecosystem Services Division:** This division includes habitat conservation staff who coordinate EFH consultations, including for aquaculture projects, as well as two regional aquaculture coordinators. The Assistant Regional Administrator is a member of the Council’s Habitat Committee.

**NOAA National Ocean Service National Centers for Coastal and Ocean Science (NCOOS):** Prepares siting reports that evaluate environmental, fishery, and management considerations at potential aquaculture sites.

**Northeast Regional Ocean Council (NROC), Ocean Planning Committee (OPC):** NEFMC is a member of both NROC and the OPC and participates in an ongoing Best Practices work group to promote strategies for regional coordination. Aquaculture development is an issue of shared interest across multiple member organizations.

**U.S. Army Corps of Engineers:** Responsible for certain elements of aquaculture permitting, specifically related to structures placed in the water.

**U.S. Environmental Protection Agency:** Responsible for certain elements of aquaculture permitting, specifically related to water quality and discharge.

**State fishery and coastal zone agencies:** These agencies have a role in permitting and environmental review, both for state and federal waters’ projects. Fisheries considerations and concerns, including issues related to habitat impacts, may align with issues of interest to the Council.

**Private aquaculture developers:** Engagement with developers could occur at the pre-application or application stage.

**Potential activities**

These activities and which groups or individuals would likely participate in them are summarized in the table below.

1. **Engage in project-specific conversations** during the pre-application, application, or operational phases.
   - Share the Council’s expertise related to data used in siting analyses. These could include fishery independent data from resource surveys, fishery dependent data (Vessel Trip Report, Vessel Monitoring System), or habitat data (sediments, seafloor topography). Feedback could be provided during development of the NOAA NCCOS siting report, or before that report is prepared.
     - NEFMC staff, or via discussions at Committee or Advisory Panel meetings.
   - Participate in pre-application interagency meetings via invitation (coordinated by NOAA GARFO). An opportunity to learn about the project, ask questions about intended operations and the permitting process, and provide informal feedback.
     - NEFMC staff
   - Express concerns about site selection, fish, habitat, and fisheries issues via written comments to private aquaculture developers and/or federal agencies.
NEFMC Aquaculture Coordination Plan

- **NEFMC staff, in coordination with PDT; reviewed by Committee, Council, either during meetings or via correspondence, as time permits**
- Comment on NEPA documents, participate in public hearings, which could be coordinated by NOAA, EPA, ACOE, or state agencies.
  - **NEFMC staff, in coordination with PDT; reviewed by Committee, Council, either during meetings or via correspondence, as time permits**
- Ask developers to participate in our meetings to provide project information
  - **NEFMC staff, private aquaculture developers, via briefings at Committee or Council meetings**

2. **Engage in regional-scale conversations** related to aquaculture siting, including development of Aquaculture Opportunity Areas, not connected with specific projects.
- Connect with relevant state and federal agencies
  - Share Council aquaculture policy; follow up on letters sent last summer, which explained Council role in EFH designation and EFH consultations
  - Establish ongoing dialog/relationship with these agencies around aquaculture issues
  - Quarterly (or as needed) meetings with NOAA GARFO staff
    - **Council staff, GARFO staff, agency staff**
- Inform regional aquaculture siting
  - Recommend relevant data sources (including identification of caveats)
  - Develop a better understanding of developer needs, in a general sense (distance from port, depth, temperature)
    - **Council staff, via discussions at Committee, Council meetings**

3. **Continue to develop expertise** on aquaculture projects and their environmental effects.
- Serve as an information resource for members and stakeholders
  - Disseminate scientific reports, webinar announcements, news, comment opportunities
  - Add resources to the habitat policies page on the Council website
    - **Council staff, working with NOAA staff and PDT to identify relevant information**
- Request expert presentations at meetings
  - Could include both science and policy topics
    - **Council staff, working with NOAA staff, at Committee or Council meetings**
- Review aquaculture policy and backgrounder on a periodic basis for continued relevance
  - **NEFMC staff, PDT, AP, Committee, Council, in coordination with NOAA and other agency staff**
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<th>Task</th>
<th>Council</th>
<th>Habitat Ctte</th>
<th>Habitat Advisory Panel</th>
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<th>Council Staff</th>
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<th>Others</th>
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