Council Recommends Recreational Measures for Gulf of Maine Cod, Haddock for 2022; Discusses Atlantic Cod Stock Structure

The New England Fishery Management Council met February 1-3, 2022 by webinar and devoted the entire third day of the meeting to groundfish issues. In short, the Council:

- Developed recommendations on recreational fishing measures for Gulf of Maine cod and Gulf of Maine haddock for the 2022 fishing year for consideration by the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) of NOAA Fisheries, which consults with the Council but is responsible for setting the measures;
- Received a presentation on the 2021 Atlantic Cod Stock Structure Science/Assessment and Management Workshops, as well as the resulting draft final report;
- Received a progress report from the Atlantic Cod Research Track Working Group; and
- Engaged in an extensive discussion on potential management units for Atlantic cod based on the recent work on stock structure. The Council gave the Groundfish Committee a specific charge for considering next steps, which the full Council will review and discuss during the April 2022 meeting.

The Council annually develops recommendations for recreational fishing measures for Gulf of Maine cod and Gulf of Maine haddock. These measures, which take the form of bag limits, seasons, and minimum fish sizes, are proactive accountability measures (AMs) that are intended to allow the recreational fishery to “achieve but not exceed” the sub-annual catch limits (sub-ACLs) for these stocks. GARFO considers the Council’s recommendations but has the final say in determining and implementing the measures. For the 2022 groundfish fishing year, which begins on May 1, the Council recommended the following.

**Gulf of Maine Cod and Haddock Recreational Fishing Recommendations for Fishing Year 2022**

- **Gulf of Maine Cod:**
  - Open Season: September 1 to October 7, 2022 and April 1-14, 2023 for all modes (private, party, charter);
  - Bag Limit: one fish per day; and
  - Minimum Size: 22 inches

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True Fin commercial fisherman Joe Letourneau holds up part of the day’s cod catch. – True Fin photo
New England Fishery Management Council

• Gulf of Maine Haddock:
  o Open Season: May 1, 2022 through February 28/29, 2023 and April 1-30, 2023, leaving only March 2023 closed to recreational fishing for this stock;
  o Bag Limit: 20 fish per day, up from the current 15-fish limit; and
  o Minimum Size: 17 inches

The Council’s recommendations include: (1) an expanded fall season for cod over the 2021 fishing year; (2) an increase in the minimum size for cod from 21” to 22”; and (3) a bag limit increase for haddock from the current 15 fish to 20 fish.

Based on a recommendation from its Groundfish Committee, the Council initially discussed a 22” to 28” slot limit for Gulf of Maine cod. However, the Council concluded that a single 22” minimum size better balanced the risk of exceeding the cod sub-ACL while allowing recreational fishermen to achieve the sub-ACL for haddock.

The recreational fishery has not exceeded or achieved its sub-ACL for either Gulf of Maine cod or Gulf of Maine haddock for the past three fishing years. More information is available in the presentation and in the bioeconomic model summary.

How This Works

The recreational fishery is subject to sub-annual catch limits (sub-ACLs) for Gulf of Maine (GOM) cod and haddock.

• GOM Cod: The proposed sub-ACL, which is expected to be implemented through Framework 63 to the groundfish plan, is 192 metric tons.

• GOM Haddock: The 3,634-metric-ton sub-ACL for this stock was set through Framework Adjustment 59.

The Council annually recommends a suite of management measures for GARFO’s regional administrator to consider to allow the recreational fishery to “achieve but not exceed” the sub-ACLs. These are proactive accountability measures (AMs).

If a sub-ACL is exceeded, the regional administrator, in consultation with the Council, develops measures necessary to prevent the recreational fishery from exceeding the appropriate sub-ACL in future years. These are known as reactive AMs.

Atlantic Cod Stock Structure Workshops

The New England Fishery Management Council and Northeast Fisheries Center, with contracted support by New Hampshire Sea Grant, hosted two sets of 2021 Atlantic Cod Stock Structure Workshops. These fell into two categories:

• Science/Assessment Prospects Workshop Series: These workshops focused on (a) summarizing historical and current data for each of the five identified biological stocks (see map and cutline at right), and (b) identifying critical data gaps that must be addressed to improve assessments; and

• Management Workshop Series: These workshops focused on gathering input on potential management changes and possible economic and social impacts.

THE STARTING POINT: A 2018 Atlantic Cod Stock Structure Working Group concluded in a 2020 report that Atlantic cod consists of five distinct biological stocks as shown above instead of two. This recommendation was the starting point for the 2021 workshops.
The Council received a detailed presentation on workshop objectives and conclusions, along with the draft final report. All workshop materials, agendas, and related documents are posted on the workshop website. Workshop organizers did not make any formal recommendations. The purpose of the workshops was to synthesize all available information and present the summaries to the Council and Science Center for further consideration.

Next, the Council received a progress report from the Atlantic Cod Research Track Working Group, which is preparing the 2023 Atlantic Cod Research Track Assessment. The working group is in the early stages of conducting the assessment and is being guided by clearly defined Terms of Reference.

In order to improve alignment between the scale of the research track assessment, the new understanding of biological stock structure, and data limitations, the working group has formulated an initial recommendation in favor of proceeding with four biological stock units as shown in the map below.

Armed with this wealth of information, the Council considered one overarching question and five focused questions during its preliminary discussion about potential changes to management units for Atlantic cod.

The primary question was: “Does the Council support the Atlantic Cod Research Track Working Group’s initial proposal for four biological units as the new paradigm for management units?”

The five focused questions were:
1. Given the information, what makes this difficult to discuss at present?
2. What needs to be clarified at this point? Elaborate.
3. Is there a maximum number of management units the Council should consider?
4. Are there combinations of biological units the Council cannot support?
5. Do you prefer fewer stocks with analytic assessments, or more stocks even if that means several have empirical assessments?

Interested in listening to the Council’s Atlantic Cod Stock Structure discussion? Audio from the meeting is posted HERE.
The Council went through the questions one by one and heard numerous points of view. In the end, it voted to charge the Groundfish Committee with considering whether the Council should change its 2022 groundfish priorities to develop a plan for transitioning from the current two cod management units to somewhere between two-to-five revised management units.

The Council will discuss the committee’s recommendations during its April 12-14, 2022 meeting and weigh its options. Keep tabs on the Council’s calendar and groundfish webpage for upcoming committee and advisory panel meetings.

**ATLANTIC COD RESEARCH TRACK MEETING REMINDER**

All meetings of the Atlantic Cod Research Track Working Group are open to the public. The next four scheduled meetings will take place on the second Friday of each month from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. as follows:

- Friday, March 11, 2022
- Friday, April 8, 2022
- Friday, May 13, 2022
- Friday, June 10, 2022

Webinar registration information is posted [HERE](#). Scroll down to the bottom of the page and click through the days under “Schedule.”

**Need More Info?** All documents, presentations, and correspondence associated with the Council’s February groundfish discussion are [posted HERE](#).

**Questions?** Contact Dr. Jamie Cournane, the Council’s groundfish plan coordinator, at (978) 465-0492 ext. 103, jcournane@nefmc.org.

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**Atlantic Cod Research Track Timeline**

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Kickoff Working Group (WG) meeting</td>
<td>Nov. 12, 2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working Group formed</td>
<td>Oct. 2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>WG Meeting</td>
<td>Dec. 10, 2021</td>
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<td>WG Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>WG Meeting</td>
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**KEY:** ToR = Term of Reference. The 2023 Atlantic Cod Research Track Assessment is being conducted under eight (and potentially nine) Terms of Reference, which are posted under “Key Documents” on working group [webpage](#).