



New England Fishery Management Council

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Council Votes to Submit Groundfish Framework 61 to GARFO; Action Includes Universal Sector Exemption for Redfish

The New England Fishery Management Council voted on [January 26, 2021](#) to include a universal sector exemption for redfish in Framework Adjustment 61 to the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan. If approved by NOAA Fisheries, the exemption would allow groundfish sector vessels to target redfish with 5.5-inch codend mesh within a larger Redfish Exemption Area in the future than was available in the 2020 fishing year.

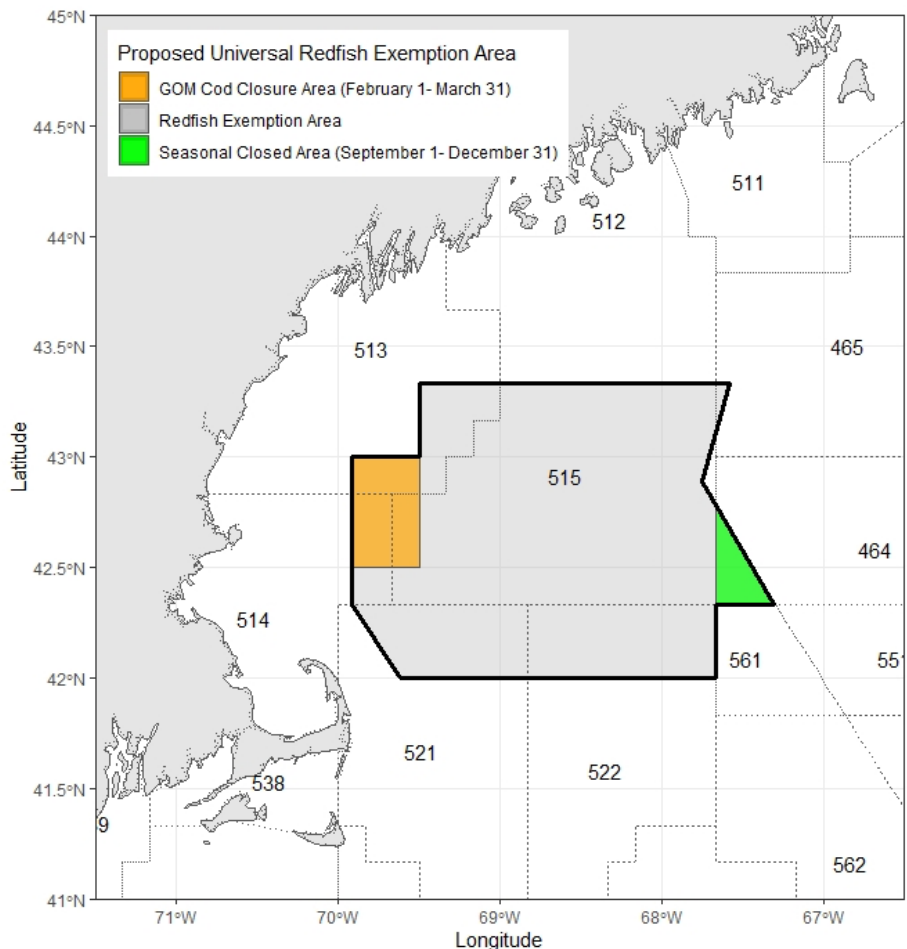
Following this decision, the Council voted to submit Framework 61 to NOAA's Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) for review and implementation. The target implementation date is May 1, 2021, the start of the new fishing year.

The Council signed off on all other Framework 61 measures, including 2021-2023 specifications for groundfish stocks based on updated assessment information, during its [December 2020](#) meeting. A recap is [available here](#).

Universal Sector Exemption



For several years now, groundfish sectors have requested exemptions within their annual operations plans to fish for redfish with 5.5-inch codend



The Redfish Exemption Area that's defined under the Council's universal sector exemption in Framework Adjustment 61 is outlined above with a black boundary. Two portions of the area would be subject to seasonal closures as defined in the key.



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mesh instead of 6.5-inch mesh within a defined Redfish Exemption Area. From 2015 through 2019, the approved Redfish Exemption Area covered a fairly large portion of the Gulf of Maine (see top map below).

For the 2020 fishing year, GARFO implemented changes to those boundaries “to minimize catch of non-redfish stocks under the exemption while still allowing vessels to fish in areas where redfish are abundant and bycatch of other stocks is minimal” (see bottom map below).

During its June 2020 meeting, the Council [voted to write a letter to GARFO](#) asking that NOAA Fisheries “immediately issue a rule reverting the Redfish Exemption Area to its fishing year 2019 state and work collaboratively with sector members to: (1) understand the nature of the fishery and the exemption as refined in fishing year 2015; and (2) if necessary, develop modifications for future rulemaking.”

The groundfish sector community then approached the Council with a proposal for a modified Redfish Exemption Area that would address GARFO’s concerns and be included in Framework 61 as a universal sector exemption. This way, the exemption would be part of the groundfish plan, and sectors would not need to submit requests for exemptions annually.

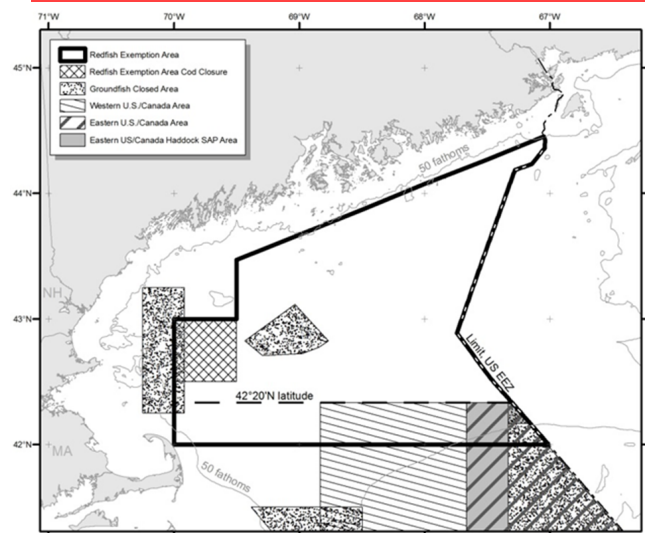
The original industry proposal that was submitted to the Council for consideration is available [here](#).

The Council’s Groundfish Committee, with considerable input from the Groundfish Advisory Panel and the developers of the industry proposal, worked through many details in order to bring a refined alternative to the Council for consideration at the January 2021 meeting.

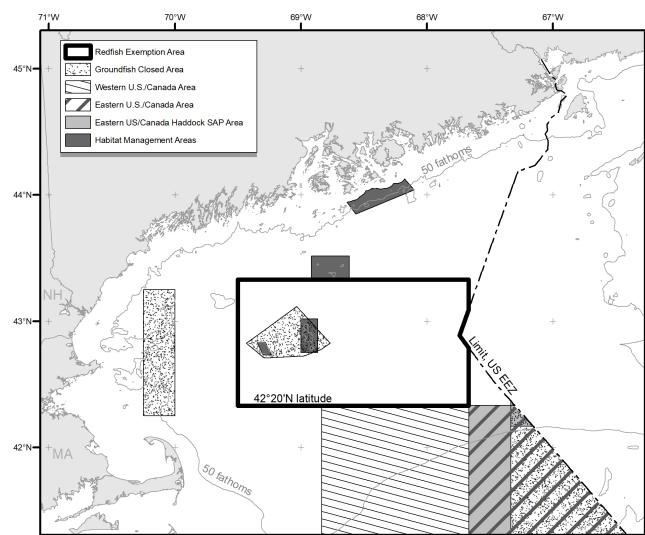
The refined alternative supports a universal sector exemption that would allow sector vessels to fish within an area that is larger than the one implemented in 2020 but smaller than the 2015-2019 area. It also includes two seasonal closures (see map on page 1) and stricter performance standards.

The Council supported this alternative to increase stability and certainty for industry participants and improve Council control and oversight of the fishery.

2015-2019 Redfish Exemption Area



2020 Redfish Exemption Area





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The Council's program would:

- Continue to allow use of an efficient 5.5-inch codend mesh size for redfish;
- Increase the harvest of redfish while reducing, to the extent practicable, bycatch of other groundfish stocks;
- Restore flexibility lost with the 2020 contraction of the Redfish Exemption Area;
- Remove areas from the exemption that provide little opportunity to effectively target redfish.

The Council agreed to have its Groundfish Plan Development Team conduct a review of the program next time the Acadian redfish stock is assessed.

Performance Standards and Accountability Measures

Groundfish sectors are responsible for ensuring that their members comply with all sector provisions, and this would remain the case with the universal sector exemption for redfish. In addition, GARFO would be responsible for monitoring the program's thresholds and determining whether a sector failed to meet any of the thresholds.

The current and previous redfish sector exemptions – the ones that sectors have requested annually in their individual operations plans – included performance standards. The Council supported stronger performance standards under the universal sector exemption as follows:

- Vessels working under the universal exemption must continue to meet a **monthly threshold** of: (1) at least 50% redfish landings; and (2) less than 5% groundfish discards.
- The Council added accountability measures for failing to meet either of the monthly thresholds for: (a) four or more months per fishing year; or (b) three consecutive months. If either threshold is breached, that sector's ability to participate in the program will be revoked for the remainder of the fishing year, and the sector will be on "probationary status" the following year.
- Sectors would be required to meet an **annual** 55% landings threshold for redfish harvested within the Redfish Exemption Area under the universal exemption program.



Above, redfish captured during a 2019 research trip conducted by the UMass Dartmouth School for Marine Science and Technology. All materials used during the Council's January 26, 2021 Groundfish discussion can be found [here](#). – SMAST photo

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