New England Fishery Management Council
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Eric Reid, *Chair* | Cate O'Keefe, PhD, *Executive Director*

MEETING SUMMARY

Scallop Committee

Hybrid; Wakefield, MA
June 17, 2024

The Scallop Committee (Committee) met in Wakefield, MA and via webinar on July 17, 2024 to discuss: 1) Scallop Research Set-Aside (RSA), including 2025/2026 research priority recommendations; 2) flatfish accountability measures; and 3) other business.

The meeting began at approximately 1:30 PM

MEETING ATTENDANCE:
Ms. Melanie Griffin (Committee Chair), Mr. Mark Alexander, Ms. Togue Brawn, Ms. Michelle Duval, Mr. Matt Gates, Ms. Emily Gilbert, Mr. Eric Hansen, Mr. Peter Hughes, Mr. John Pappalardo, Ms. Melissa Smith, and Ms. Renee Zobel; Council Staff: Mr. Jonathon Peros, Mr. Connor Buckley; AP: Mr. James Gutowski (Scallop Advisory Panel Chair)

Several members of the public were also in attendance.

KEY OUTCOMES:
The Scallop Committee moved to recommend that the Council adopt the PDT's recommendations to set Scallop RSA priorities for two-years, allow up to three-year awards for RSA projects focusing on scallop enhancement, and to adopt the PDT's edits to the 2025/2026 research priorities.

AGENDA ITEM #1: ADVISORY PANEL CHAIR REPORT
AP Chair James Gutowski gave a report to the Committee on the previous day's Scallop AP meeting, highlighting the AP motions regarding changes to the Scallop RSA program, including recommendations for 2025/2026 research priorities.

AGENDA ITEM #2: 2025/2026 SCALLOP RSA PRIORITIES

MOTION 1: ALEXDANDER/HUGHES

Move that the Committee recommends that the Council adopt the PDT's recommendations to:

1. Set the RSA research priorities for two years (e.g. 2025-2027).

2. Allow up to three-year awards for enhancement projects (vs. two-year awards).

In addition, the Committee recommends that the Council adopt the PDT's edits to the research priorities for the 2025/2026 RSA cycle (see below and Document 4a in meeting materials).

Rationale: These measures would improve efficiency for RSA program administration. Moving to a two-year priority setting process would move the process earlier in the year. The Committee recommends allowing for modifications that are deemed to be critical for the program at the April Council meeting before the NOFO is published.

Scallop Committee Recommendations for 2025/2026 RSA priorities:

SURVEYS (High Priority)

1. SCALLOP RESOURCE SURVEYS: Industry-based scallop surveys using dredge and/or optical tools conducted at varying sampling intensities (e.g., intensive and regional), and analysis of collected survey data needed to support annual Atlantic Sea Scallop fishery management and scallop science needs. This includes industry-based surveys within Georges Bank and/or the Mid-Atlantic, and the Gulf of Maine, including the Northern Gulf of Maine Management Area. Surveys may extend sampling efforts beyond the current known extent of the sea scallop resource. Survey results must be available by early August of the year in which the survey is conducted (e.g., survey results that would inform 2026 fishing effort decisions must be available by mid-August 2025). The survey or surveys do not need to be carried out by a single grant recipient. In addition, the data needs of some resource areas benefit from redundant surveys that use different sampling technologies (e.g., optical and dredge). Survey data will be used to develop estimates of total and exploitable biomass. Successful projects may be asked to provide data in a standardized format. The primary objective of these surveys would be to provide length frequencies, abundance, and biomass estimates.

Medium Priorities: (Priorities 2-8, Not Listed in Rank Order – Equal Importance)

2. SCALLOP BIOLOGY: Research on Atlantic sea scallop biology, including studies aimed at understanding recruitment processes (e.g., reproduction and gonad development, timing of spawning, larval transport, larval and early post-settlement stages, source/sink dynamics, age and growth, and yield), spatial population dynamics of the scallop resource, and examination of environmental stressors (anthropogenic and natural) and climate change on all of these processes. This priority also includes research on natural mortality processes, such as scallop predation (e.g., starfish, crab, snails), discard mortality, juvenile mortality events, and disease and parasites. The results of biology research should be informative to scallop stock assessments and projection models (current and future) and to support decision-making by fishery managers.

3. TURTLES: Research to support the investigation of sea turtle behavior in the Mid- Atlantic and Georges Bank (via satellite tagging or other means). This could include, but is not limited to, research to understand their seasonal movements, vertical habitat utilization, and the status and range of the population in response to climate change. This could also include research on gear design to reduce incidental takes of ESA-listed species. This research could assist in the collection of data that may be required by current or future biological opinions, to address reasonable and prudent measures of the biological opinion and could be used to evaluate current turtle regulations (e.g., timing and spatial extent of gear modifications). Oceanographic data collected during turtle research should be analyzed and products provided to managers to support decision making (e.g., bottom temperature data and maps).

4. COMMERCIAL FISHING GEAR: Commercial dredge and gear research to improve scallop catch efficiency, improve scallop size selectivity, reduce scallop damage (discard and incidental mortality), reduce non-target species bycatch, and reduce fuel consumption and improve energy efficiency. Research under this priority area could explore fishermen perspectives and decision-making associated with gear modifications.

5. BYCATCH: Identification and evaluation of methods to reduce the impacts of the scallop fishery with respect to bycatch of small scallops and non-target species. This would include projects that characterize spatial and temporal distribution patterns of non-target species, collect and analyze catch and bycatch data on a near-real time basis, as well as the associated discard mortality rates of key bycatch species. Research efforts focusing on non-target bycatch should provide results that would help the scallop industry avoid or respond to the implementation of accountability measures. Projects should consider the enforceability and feasibility of regulations in the commercial fishery.

6. FISHING IN HIGH DENSITY AREAS: Research to examine the impacts of intensive fishing effort in areas of high scallop densities on non-harvest mortality or sublethal effects.

This includes impacts of sediment disruption, impact of high volumes of viscera on the benthic environment and water quality, scallop shell damage, repeated harvest/discarding cycles on scallop mortality, and re- examination of non-harvest mortality assumptions. This may include research that occurs concurrently with harvest. This priority includes research (inclusive of tools in social science) into fisherman's behavior and decision-making and ways to improve fishing practices to minimize waste and maximize yield.

7. WIND: Research aimed to support scallop management through studies that assess biological and ecological impacts of offshore wind energy development, and scallop production. This priority also includes research that aims to characterize the impacts of offshore wind energy development on scallop surveys through simulation modeling recommended by the Scallop Survey Working Group, and research that assesses the utility and feasibility of alternative sampling tools.

8. SCALLOP RESOURCE ENHANCEMENT: Research focused on the development of Atlantic sea scallop enhancement tools (spat collection, seed rearing in hatcheries, grow out of juvenile scallops, disease resistance, and offshore seeding of hatchery reared spat) to supplement the scallop population and fishery harvest in the federally managed scallop fishery. Research could focus on the development of standards and best practices for using husbandry techniques to enhance the wild capture fishery while mitigating the impact of predators or could evaluate the economic feasibility of enhancement efforts. Research could also focus on projects that aim to develop and(or) refine techniques for growing seed from spat and transplanting those scallops to beds in federal waters. Projects conducted in state waters should describe plans to comply with local and state regulations. Projects are encouraged to share best practices and lessons learned to advance the state of knowledge in this field.

General Priorities:

9. HABITAT CHARACTERIZATION AND FISHERY IMPACT RESEARCH: Research on fishery impacts includes (but is not limited to): identification of which species and life history stages depend on particular habitats vulnerable to alteration by the scallop fishery for use as nursery, over-wintering, or spawning areas; evaluation of long-term or chronic effects of scallop fishing on the ecosystem; habitat recovery potential from fine scale fishing effort; before / after gradient designs. Habitat characterization includes (but is not limited to) research aimed at identifying and assessing the waters and substrate necessary to scallops for spawning, breeding, feeding, and growth to maturity. In particular, projects that would evaluate Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) closures and Habitat Management Areas to assess whether these areas are accomplishing their stated purposes and to assist with better definition of the complex ecosystem processes that occur in these areas would be of interest. Finally, investigation of variability in dredge efficiency across habitats, times, areas, and

gear designs to allow for more accurate quantitative estimates of scallop dredge impacts on the seabed and other managed species, and the development of practicable methods to minimize or mitigate those impacts would also qualify under this research priority.

Discussion on the motion:
Mr. Peros asked for clarification on whether the language of the motion regarding 2-year priority setting was intended to only be for the upcoming cycle, or in perpetuity, to which Mr. Alexander replied that his intent was for the change to be permanent. A Committee member asked whether the change in priority setting would still leave flexibility for the Council to react annually to novel challenges as needed. Mr. Peros replied that the intent of the Scallop PDT and AP was to give the Council an opportunity to comment on Scallop RSA priorities each year at the April meeting before the Notice of Funding Opportunity would be released. The Committee also supported the concept of having an opportunity to possibly modify the RSA priority list at the April Council meeting.

Public Comment: None

MOTION #1 CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY BY CONSENT

AGENDA ITEM #3: FLATFISH ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES
Mr. Buckley presented the Committee with an update on the work of the Scallop PDT to review the management of Georges Bank yellowtail flounder, Mid-Atlantic/Southern New-England yellowtail flounder, northern windowpane flounder, and southern windowpane flounder, which are currently allocated to the scallop fishery from within the Groundfish FMP. Mr. Buckley noted that while the Groundfish PDT is working to revisit the scallop fisheries allocation percentage of each stock, the Scallop PDT is working to assess the effectiveness of the reactive AM in addressing consistent overages of the sub-ACLs.

Discussion:
A Committee member asked if there were additional sources of data that could be considered in the analysis. Mr. Buckley replied that he was unaware of any additional follow-up work on the effectiveness of the AM gear, but there were additional considerations (e.g. tow speed) that the PDT could investigate. Additionally, he noted that data to support a decision to modify the extent and location of the Gear Restricted Area was readily available.

Another Committee member shared that fishermen participating in square-mesh belly panel gear research have struggled to catch sufficient windowpane or yellowtail flounder to test the gear. They also noted that adjusting the seasonal closure may be a viable solution to reduce bycatch.

AGENDA ITEM #3: OTHER BUSINESS
A Committee member raised several concerns that came up during the June 14 AP meeting. For observer coverage rates above the Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology (SBRM) in the

Northern Edge action, the Committee member commented that they would like to see it recommended to NMFS that coverage be evenly distributed across the season to better track changes over time. Mr. Travis Ford replied that the new Pre-Trip Notification System (PTNS) is aiming to evenly distribute coverage across the season. He also noted that PTNS is achieving a higher proportion of their selected coverage rate than the previous system, and it will require a little more time to adjust to the appropriate selection rate to achieve the correct coverage rate. Lastly, he noted that many recent concerns around observer coverage in the scallop fishery have been related to vessels being unable to catch their observer compensation in low LPUE areas.

Regarding trip trading, a Committee member expressed their support for setting a trip limit that was three-times the allocation, which would improve efficiency and reduce the number of vessels in the area.

Updates to Council Handbook
Mr. Peros shared that several administrative changes to the Scallop RSA Policy language in the Council Handbook were being brought to the June Council meeting for approval.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:31pm.