Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

NEWS RELEASE

Sustainable and Cooperative Management of Atlantic Coastal Fisheries

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 30, 2025

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American Lobster Benchmark Stock Assessment Finds GOM/GBK Stock Not Depleted but Experiencing Overfishing & SNE Stock Significantly Depleted but Not Experiencing Overfishing

Dewey Beach, DE – The Commission's American Lobster Management Board received the results of the 2025 American Lobster Benchmark Stock Assessment and Peer Review Report, which presents contrasting results for the two American lobster stocks in US waters. The Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank (GOM/GBK) stock is not depleted but has declined 34% since peak levels in 2018, and overfishing is occurring. The Southern New England (SNE) stock remains significantly depleted with record low abundances for all life stages in recent years.

"The Benchmark Stock Assessment is a considerable advancement in our understanding US American lobster resource. It was fully endorsed by an external panel of fishery scientists as the best scientific information available to manage the lobster resource," stated Board Chair Renee Zobel from New Hampshire. "On behalf of the American Lobster Board, I commend the members of the Technical Committee and Stock Assessment Subcommittee for their outstanding work on the 2025 Benchmark Stock Assessment Report. This assessment reflects the commitment of the Committee and Peer Review Panel to providing the Board with the highest-caliber science to inform management decisions and improve our understanding of the complex and changing relationship between the environment and lobster resource."

There are notable differences between the fisheries operating in the GOM and GBK portions of the GOM/GBK stock. The GOM fishery accounts for the vast majority of US lobster landings, averaging 82% of the annual landings since 1982, and is predominately carried out by small vessels making day trips in nearshore waters. The GBK fishery is considerably smaller, averaging 5% of the landings since 1982, and is predominantly carried out by larger vessels making multi-day trips to offshore waters. Total GOM/GBK annual landings increased from a stable period in the 1980s, averaging approximately 35.4 million pounds, through the 1990s and 2000s, exceeding 100 million pounds for the first time in 2009. Landings from 2012 through 2018 stabilized at record levels, averaging 145.7 million pounds. Landings have declined since the last assessment, averaging 123.6 million pounds from 2019-2023.

Historically, the SNE fishery was predominately an inshore fishery. Landings peaked in 1997 at 21.8 million pounds and accounted for 26% of the total US lobster landings. Following the peak, landings from SNE have continuously declined to the lowest on record in 2023 (1.7 million pounds), now accounting for

only 1% of the US landings. The fishery has also shifted to a predominantly offshore fishery as inshore abundance declined at a faster rate.

In the GOM/GBK stock, recruitment and spawning stock biomass estimates have declined in recent years from record highs. Recent exploitation is just above the exploitation threshold, indicating overfishing is occurring. Given the overfishing status and rapid declines in abundance in recent years, the Stock Assessment Subcommittee

encouraged the initiation of a management strategy evaluation to establish clear management objectives for all stakeholders, better understand socioeconomic status and concerns, and identify potential management tools that might be supported by the industry and prevent further declines. Although continued adverse environmental indicators suggest environmental conditions are major contributors to the poor abundance status in SNE, the Stock Assessment Subcommittee believes significant management action would provide the best chance of stabilizing or improving the abundance and reproductive capacity of this stock.

The assessment highlights extensive research on the influence of the environment on American lobster life history and population dynamics. Among the critical environmental variables, temperature stands out as the primary influence. The American lobster's range is experiencing changing environmental conditions at some of the fastest rates in the world, making consideration of environmental factors essential when assessing the lobster stocks. Therefore, the assessment incorporated environmental data time series including water temperatures at several fixed monitoring stations throughout the lobster's range, average water temperatures over large areas such as those sampled by fishery-independent surveys, oceanographic processes affecting the environment, and other environmental indicators such as lobster prey abundance. These data time series were analyzed for significant shifts in the lobster environment and population that can affect stock productivity and impact recruitment levels and the ability to support different levels of fishing pressure.

Stock abundance is characterized using reference points for abundance and exploitation. Based on these reference points, the GOMGBK stock is not depleted and overfishing is occurring. The average abundance from 2021-2023 was 202 million lobsters, which remains above the abundance limit reference point, but below the fishery/industry target, indicating the stock's ability to replenish itself is not jeopardized, but economic conditions for the lobster fishery may be degrading. The average exploitation from 2021-2023 was just above the exploitation threshold, indicating overfishing is occurring.

The SNE stock is significantly depleted and the stock's ability to replenish itself is diminished. The average abundance from 2021-2023 was 6 million lobster, well below the abundance threshold (18 million lobster) and the lowest on record. The average exploitation from 2021-2023 was between the exploitation threshold and target, indicating overfishing is not occurring.

Stock indicators, which are based strictly on observed data and are free from inherent assumptions in the stock assessment models, were also used as an independent, model-free assessment of the lobster stocks to corroborate the assessment model results. Indicators of adult lobster abundance generally showed similar results to the assessment model for the GOM/GBK stock, with abundance declines from peaks since 2018. GOM/GBK young-of-year (YOY) indicators have shown increases from lows in the 2010s, but remain below higher levels observed in the 2000s. Inshore surveys exhibit stronger abundance declines than offshore surveys, and indicators show higher exploitation rates inshore. New to

the 2025 assessment, recruit-dependency indicators show inshore harvest is highly dependent on incoming recruitment (lobsters that enter the fishery due to catchable size). Landings and revenue indicators show declining trends but remain at positive levels. Indicators related to environmental conditions, particularly bottom water temperatures, remain positive in GOM/GBK and shell disease prevalence, although increasing in some areas, remains low realtive to SNE.

SNE abundance indicators agree with model results and indicate declines to record low abundances for all life stages in recent years. The contraction of the SNE stock has continued and is now evident offshore as well as inshore. Given data and survey challenges leading to increased instability in the SNE model, consistent poor stock status estimates, and the lack of evidence suggesting environmental and stock conditions will improve in SNE, the Stock Assessment Subcommittee recommended future assessments evaluate the condition of the SNE stock using model-free indicators, and prioritize modelling efforts on the GOMGBK stock.

The Peer Review Panel found the 2025 assessment meets and exceeds the standard for best scientific information available and provides a suitable foundation for management. The Panel commended the addition of socioeconomic data that provide insight into changes in the fishery and the considerable efforts to evaluate environmental impacts on the stock. However, the Panel cautioned against placing too much emphasis on environmental effects and discounting the effects of fishing on the lobster populations.

The Board accepted the Benchmark Stock Assessment and Peer Review Report for management use. A more detailed overview of the stock assessment, as well as the Benchmark Stock Assessment and Peer Review Report will be available on the Commission website https://asmfc.org/species/american-lobster/ under News and Resources. For more information, please contact Caitlin Starks, Senior Fishery Management Coordinator, at cstarks@asmfc.org or 703.842.0740.

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