



Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

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MEMORANDUM

TO: American Lobster Management Board
FROM: American Lobster Technical Committee
DATE: January 20, 2026
SUBJECT: GOM/GBK Lobster Management Strategy Evaluation Development

Background

The 2025 American Lobster Benchmark Stock Assessment was presented to the Commission's American Lobster Management Board (Board) at the 2025 Annual Meeting. The assessment found that the terminal three-year (2021-2023) average reference abundance of the Gulf of Maine/Georges Bank stock had declined 34% from the time series highs of the previous (2020) assessment. Abundance fell below the Fishery/Industry target, indicating potential for degradation of economic conditions of the lobster industry, but remained above biological reference points indicating the stock is not depleted. Exploitation just exceeded the exploitation threshold, indicating that overfishing was occurring. Abundance status is the primary metric for management advice. Exploitation status (and its interpretation) is less certain and is provided as an extra safeguard against sudden increases in exploitation that may not be explained by decreasing reference abundance.

Given these results, the assessment did not recommend immediate management action in terms of regulatory changes but strongly recommended that the Board immediately initiate a Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) for the GOMGBK stock. The goals of the MSE process would be to clearly identify management objectives (across all stakeholders), to better understand socioeconomic status and concerns, and to identify potential management tools that will have buy-in from industry and prevent further declines towards biological thresholds. This recommendation is similar to a recommendation from the 2020 stock assessment but is emphasized here given the changing trends in abundance observed during the current assessment.

In response to the assessment findings and recommendations, the Board tasked the Lobster Technical Committee (TC) at the Annual Meeting to refresh guidance on initiating a MSE for American lobster at the Commission's 2026 Winter Meeting. This guidance was requested to assist the Board in considering how MSE could be of use for lobster fisheries management. The TC met via webinar two times following the Annual Meeting to develop the following guidance.

MSE Guidance

As first steps toward the development of a GOMGBK lobster MSE, the TC provides two recommendations consistent with those provided to the Board in 2021 following the 2020 stock

assessment¹. First, the TC recommends forming a steering committee for scoping and coordinating all parts of an MSE process, including the process to elicit management objectives from a variety of stakeholders as a first step. The TC recognizes the highly interdisciplinary nature of MSE and the need for additional expertise outside of the TC to successfully guide a lobster MSE. The TC recommends that representation on the steering committee include Board members, TC members, Commission staff, members of the Commission's Committee on Economics and Social Sciences, industry stakeholders (preferably those with experience participating in the fisheries management process), and members of the Commission's Assessment and Science Committee or Management and Science Committee with past experience in MSE. To be effective, the number of people in the steering committee should be limited to approximately a dozen members. A steering committee could be populated through a call for nominations and approved via Board action.

Second, the TC recommends initiation of a formal process to develop management goals and objectives for the future of the GOMGBK lobster fisheries. The steering committee would be responsible for the design and development of this process, but the TC believes a successful process would include a series of meetings, including meetings at local scales (e.g., state management zones and/or LCMAs) and at a regional stock wide scale. The spatial scale, number, and sequence of meetings would be developed by the steering committee. Management objectives developed through such a process would be used to develop an MSE, with consideration of what is feasible with available data and modeling capabilities. Until management objectives are clearly established for the future of the fishery, the TC believes further details of a MSE, including timelines and costs, will be uncertain.

The TC emphasizes that such a management objectives process is a necessary precursor to initiating an MSE but does not commit the Board to pursuing an MSE. Outcomes of such a management objective process will be beneficial no matter the direction the Board ultimately takes on MSE for lobster. The costs incurred for this process will include funding for a professional facilitator or team of facilitators and meeting costs. The TC believes contracting a professional third-party facilitator to lead stakeholder meetings will be critical to ensure discussions are respectful and productive and that the outcomes of the meetings have higher potential to be useful to future management. The cost of hiring a facilitator will depend on their role, which could range from only facilitation of regional meetings to participation in the development and planning of the process (with guidance from the steering committee) in addition to facilitation of regional and local meetings. Based on similar processes that have recently been undertaken by the Commission and other agencies, the TC estimates facilitation costs for the proposed management objectives process would fall in the range of \$40,000 (facilitation only) to \$100,000 (process development and facilitation of all workshops).

¹ Technical Committee Memo: [LobsterTCReport_ManagementStrategyEvaluation_April2021.pdf](#)