

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

American Lobster Management Board

August 4, 2026

11:15 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.

Draft Agenda

The times listed are approximate; the order in which these items will be taken is subject to change; other items may be added as necessary

- | | |
|---|------------|
| 1. Welcome/Call to Order (<i>R. Zobel</i>) | 11:15 a.m. |
| 2. Board Consent | 11:15 a.m. |
| • Approval of Agenda | |
| • Approval of Proceedings from May 2026 | |
| 3. Public Comment | 11:20 a.m. |
| 4. Update on Management Objectives Process Steering Committee Progress
(<i>C. Starks</i>) | 11:30 a.m. |
| 5. Consider Lobster Conservation Management Team 5 Proposal to Modify
Season Closure (<i>J. Clark</i>) Action | 11:40 a.m. |
| 6. Reports from Gulf of Maine States on Industry Surveys and Meetings
(<i>C. Wilson, R. Zobel, R. Glenn</i>) | 12:00 p.m. |
| 7. Update on Request for Information for Alternative Gear Marking Framework
(<i>A. Murphy</i>) | 12:05 p.m. |
| 8. Other Business/Adjourn | 12:15 p.m. |

The meeting will be held at The Westin Crystal City (1800 Richmond Highway, Arlington, VA; 703.486.1111) and via webinar; click [here](#) for details.

Sustainable and Cooperative Management of Atlantic Coastal Fisheries

MEETING OVERVIEW

American Lobster Management Board

August 4, 2026

11:15 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.

Chair: Renee Zobel (NH) Assumed Chairmanship: 03/25	Lobster Technical Committee Chair: Tracy Pugh (MA) Jonah Crab Technical Committee Chair: Corinne Truesdale (RI)	Law Enforcement Committee Rep: Rob Beal (ME)
Vice Chair: John Maniscalco (NY)	Lobster Advisory Panel Chair: Grant Moore (MA) Jonah Crab Advisory Panel Chair: Sonny Gwin (MD)	Previous Board Meeting: May 4, 2026
Voting Members: ME, NH, MA, RI, CT, NY, NJ, DE, MD, VA, NMFS, NEFMC (12 votes)		

2. Board Consent

- Approval of Agenda
- Approval of Proceedings from May 2026

3. Public Comment – At the beginning of the meeting, public comment will be taken on items not on the agenda. Individuals that wish to speak at this time must sign-in at the beginning of the meeting. For agenda items that have already gone out for public hearing and/or have had a public comment period that has closed, the Board Chair may determine that additional public comment will not provide additional information. In this circumstance, the Chair will not allow additional public comment on an issue. For agenda items that the public has not had a chance to provide input, the Board Chair may allow limited opportunity for comment. The Board Chair has the discretion to limit the number of speakers and/or the length of each comment.

4. Update on Management Objectives Process Steering Committee Progress (11:30-11:40 a.m.) Possible Action

Background

- The Board agreed to form a steering committee (SC) to 1) review existing management objectives, as outlined in Amendment #3 and subsequent addenda, relative to the current GOM/GBK stock status, and social/economic conditions facing the fishery today, and 2) develop a process that would clearly identify new management objectives (across all stakeholders), to better understand socioeconomic status and concerns, and to identify potential management tools. SC membership was approved in May 2026. The SC includes representation from the Board, TC, Commission staff, the Commission's Committee on Economics and Social Sciences, industry stakeholders, and the Commission's Assessment and Science Committee or Management and Science Committee with past experience in MSE.
- The SC met in June for initial discussions on the assigned tasks **(Briefing Materials)**.

Presentations

- Management Objectives Process Steering Committee Progress by C. Starks

5. Consider Lobster Conservation Management Team 5 Proposal to Modify Season Closure (11:40-12:00 p.m.) Action
Background • The Lobster Conservation Management Team (LCMT) for Area 5 submitted a proposal to modify the lobster fishery season closure in LCMA 5. • The TC met earlier this year to discuss this proposal and provide input to the management Board at the May 2026 meeting. • LCMT 5 proposes that the LCMA 5 season be revised to allow black sea bass pots to be set beginning on March 9 instead of March 24 while maintaining the current American lobster harvest closure (February 1 through March 31) (Briefing Materials). This is consistent with the American Lobster Technical Committee recommendation in its April 20, 2026 memo to the Board.
Presentations • LCMT 5 Proposal to Modify Season Closure by J. Clark
Board Actions for Consideration at the Meeting • Consider approval of LCMT 5 proposal and recommendation to NOAA Fisheries to modify regulations

6. Reports from Gulf of Maine States on Industry Surveys and Meetings (12:00-12:05 p.m.)
Background • Concurrent with the implementation of Addendum XXXII, the Gulf of Maine states agreed to work with the lobster industry to develop management strategies to ensure the long-term health of the resource and the coastal communities it supports. • The Board requested Maine and New Hampshire provide updates on industry meetings and possible alternative management measures to those of Addendum XXVII at each quarterly meeting. • Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts have completed industry meetings and surveys to gather input on management approaches.
Presentations • Update from Gulf of Maine States on Industry Meetings by C. Wilson, R. Zobel, and B. Glenn

7. Update on Request for Information on Alternative Gear Marking Framework (12:05-12:15 p.m.)
Background • The New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Councils) are developing a joint alternative gear marking framework adjustment to provide alternative fixed gear surface marking requirements in all New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council fishery management plans. This regulatory modification would allow for the use of fixed gears without a persistent buoy line (i.e., on-demand gear). • The Councils met in September and October 2025 and each agreed to postpone further action on the Framework until additional information on ropeless gear and visualization technology, as solicited through a NMFS Request for Information (RFI), is available to inform stakeholder input and Council decision-making. • An RFI on ropeless fishing was published in the federal register on July 16, 2026 (Briefing Materials).

Presentations

- Update on Request for Information for Alternative Gear Marking Framework by A. Murphy

8. Other Business/Adjourn (12:15 p.m.)

**DRAFT PROCEEDINGS OF THE
ATLANTIC STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION
AMERICAN LOBSTER MANAGEMENT BOARD**

**The Westin Crystal City
Arlington, Virginia
Hybrid Meeting**

May 4, 2026

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

TABLE OF CONTENT

Call to Order	1
Approval of Agenda	1
Approval of Proceedings	1
Public Comment	1
Technical Committee Report on Board Tasks	1
Gulf of Maine/Georges Bank Fishery Projections with Original Addendum XXVII Gauge Increases.....	1
Change in Lobster Conservation Management Area 5 Season Closure Dates	10
Consider Management Strategy Evaluation Steering Committee Nominations.....	13
Update on Request for Information for Alternative Gear Marking Framework	17
Consider Outstanding Management Changes.....	17
Review and Populate Advisory Panel Membership.....	18
Adjournment	18

INDEX OF MOTIONS

1. **Approval of agenda** by consent (Page 1).
2. **Approval of Proceedings of October 2025** by consent (Page 1).
3. **Move to approve the nominations to the Steering Committee on Lobster MSE** (Page 15). Motion by Carl Wilson; second by Jay McNamee. Motion passed by unanimous consent (Page 16).
4. **Move to approve the nomination of Chris Townsend from Massachusetts to the Lobster Advisory Panel to replace Eric Lorentzen** (Page 18). Motion by Bob Glenn; second by Joe Cimino. Motion passed by unanimous consent (Page 18).
5. **Move to adjourn** by consent (Page 18).

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

ATTENDANCE

Board Members

Carl Wilson, ME (AA)	Robert LaFrance, CT, proxy for J. Gresko (LA)
Steve Train, ME (GA)	Bill Hyatt, CT (GA)
Rep. Allison Hepler, ME (LA)	John Maniscalco, NY, proxy for M. Gary (AA)
Renee Zobel, NH (AA)	Emerson Hasbrouck, NY (GA)
Doug Grout, NH (GA)	Monica Martinez, NY (LA)
Dennis Abbott, NH, proxy for Sen. Watters (LA)	Joe Cimino, NJ (AA)
Bob Glenn, MA, proxy for D. McKiernan (AA)	John Clark, DE (AA)
Raymond Kane, ME (GA)	Roy Miller, DE (GA)
Sarah Peake, MA, proxy for Rep. Armini (LA)	Craig Pugh, DE, proxy for Rep. Carson (LA)
Jason McNamee, RI (AA)	Michael Luisi, MD, proxy for k. Charbonneau (AA)
David Borden, RI (GA)	Joe Grist, VA (Acting AA)
Eric Reid, RI, proxy for Sen. Sosnowski (LA)	Allison Murphy, NMFS
Shanna Madsen, CT (AA)	

(AA = Administrative Appointee; GA = Governor Appointee; LA = Legislative Appointee)

Ex-Officio Members

Tracy Pugh, Technical Committee Chair	Rob Beal, Law Enforcement Committee Rep.
---------------------------------------	--

Staff

Bob Beal	Caitlin Starks	Katie Drew
Toni Kerns	Tracey Bauer	Jainita Patel
Tina Berger	James Boyle	Jeff Kipp
Madeline Musante	Chelsea Tuohy	Samara Nehemiah

The American Lobster Management Board of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission convened in the Jefferson Ballroom of the Westin Crystal City Hotel, Arlington, Virginia, via hybrid meeting, in-person and webinar; Monday, February 4, 2026, and was called to order at 10:45 a.m. by Chair Renee Zobel.

CALL TO ORDER

CHAIR RENEE ZOBEL: Okay, I'm going to call the Lobster Board to order, good morning. It feels a little bit strange. Usually, I'm the one to welcome us and open up the meeting, so I appreciate a slightly southern species doing that this morning, giving us a minute here. Welcome to the Lobster Board, look forward to the discussions today. I'm first going to go to Toni Kerns, if we have any Commissioners online.

MS. TONI KERNS: Oh yes, hopefully I'll do a little better this time than last time. We have John Maniscalco and Monica Martinez from New York, and Rob LaFrance is on from Connecticut. I think that is everybody.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Toni is testing me, Rob LaFrance is in the room, I could have sworn I saw him earlier, so thank you. We're going to jump right into our consent items this morning.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

CHAIR ZOBEL: The first item is the approval of the agenda. Does anyone have any changes to the agenda as we have in front of us today? Seeing no changes; the agenda is approved.

APPROVAL OF PROCEEDINGS

CHAIR ZOBEL: Moving on to the approval of the proceedings from our last meeting, our February meeting. Does anybody have any edits, comments on the meeting proceedings from February. Seeing none; we'll consider the proceedings approved.

PUBLIC COMMENT

The next item on the agenda is public comment for items that are not on the agenda this morning. Do we have any public comment for items not on the agenda? I'll first look to the room. Seeing none in the room, do we have anyone online? No hands online, we're moving right along.

TECHNICAL COMMITTEE REPORT ON BOARD TASKS

CHAIR ZOBEL: The next item is a Technical Committee Report on Board Tasks. We have Tracy Pugh online. Tracy, are you all set?

DR. TRACY PUGH: Yes, I am all set. Thanks everybody. We are going to go over two tasks from the Board.

GULF OF MAINE/GEORGES BANK FISHERY PROJECTIONS WITH ORIGINAL ADDENDUM XXVII GAUGE INCREASES

DR. TRACY PUGH: The first is the larger one, and the task essentially from the Board was to estimate the benefits to the Gulf of Maine/Georges Bank fishery that would have resulted from implementing the minimum gauge size increases under Addendum XXVII that were ultimately repealed. As a reminder, those gauge changes in Year 1 would have been an increase in the minimum gauge size from 3-1/4 inches to 3-5/16 of an inch for Year 1. In Year 3 there would have been a minimum legal-size increase from 3-5/16 to 3-3/8 of an inch, again Area 1. Year 4 there would have been an increase in the vent sizes in Area 1, so going to slightly larger rectangular vents then slightly larger circular vents. Then in Year 5 there would have been a decrease in the maximum gauge size for Area 3 and Area OCC from 6-3/4 down to 6-1/2 inch.

The challenge with the task as originally worded was that the scheduled implementation that originally had started in 2024, so the very original schedule. That first gauge change would have happened in 2024, but the second gauge would have happened in 2026. This kind of left us with a little bit of a challenge, in terms of the data that we would use to do these analyses.

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

We would have had pretty uncertain data from the terminal year of the stock assessment, so the 2024 data with the terminal year relatively uncertain. Then there is a significant amount of uncertainty in the projection of recruitment moving forward. To try to move forward with analysis from the original implementation schedule, the TC felt like there was a pretty high degree of uncertainty that would not really have provided a very useful analysis.

What we decided to do was essentially to work with an earlier implementation schedule, so that we would have data to work with. This would let us use recruitment in fishing mortality estimates coming out of the 2025 assessment. The focus with this is really to provide short term estimate of impacts of these management measures.

Just as a note, we did not attempt to model any kind of a relationship between the lobsters that would be newly protected with these, and any resulting egg production or young-of-year settlement success. There is no stock recruit relationship in these analyses.

The approach that we used is again this earlier implementation schedule, so the Year 1 of the minimum gauge increase would happen in 2019. Year 3 then would happen in 2021. The vent size increase in Year 4 would be 2022, and then the Year 5 maximum gauge decrease would happen in 2023.

For these analyses we used a simulation model, and we started this model out with the model estimated size structure coming out of the stock assessment for Quarter 1 in 2018. To do this we had to modify the model size bins. If you remember from the stock assessment, the size bins we normally use are 5mm increments. In order to do this analysis, we needed to make modifications to get those size bins down to 1mm increments.

This was a little bit of a lift, got it done, and this is going to let us capture those small changes in

the gauge size. To capture the changes in gauge size and vent size we did the commercial selectivities, and again then we used recruitment in fishing mortality estimates for 2018 through 2023 coming from the stock assessment.

Then for recruitment going forward we used the equivalent of the smooth trend that was developed for the stock assessment projections. That was the trend that the TC and the SAS felt was the most appropriate for projection recruitment forward. For fishing mortality from 2024 to 2030 we averaged quarterly fishing mortality from the time series. Essentially what we did was compare the results of two scenarios here. The first scenario, the Unchanged Scenario, and in this we didn't make any changes to existing gauge or vent sizes. Then the Change Scenario essentially implements those changes in the earlier implementation schedule I just showed you, starting in 2019. Most of the results are focused on 2018 through 2023, but we could carry some of them forward through 2030.

Essentially, we're trying to look at what the catch composition is going to look like if these changes had occurred. We also then looked at the relative change in catch by numbers, so by number of lobsters landed and by weight of those lobsters landed through 2030. We looked at the results from the Changed Scenario over Unchanged Scenario for reference abundance in spawning stock biomass.

Then we also take a look at how it affects exploitation from 2018 through 2030. In addition to the simulation work, Maine DMR did an analysis using their sea sampling data, so a more straightforward analysis with the sea sampling data, to try to understand what the first decline in the gauge change would do with the decline in landings by quarter and Maine fishing zone. We'll show those results also.

I've just sort of selectively pulled a couple of representative graphs and tables out of the report, I'm not showing all of them. For all of it you will have to go to the report. This first one is looking at change in landings by weight. The graph on the

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

right, if you look it is showing essentially the percent of the landings by weight by size. The X axis is size in millimeters, and the Y axis is percent of landings by weight.

The dark coloring of the curve in here is the Unchanged scenario, and then the orangish gold color is the Change scenario. Then there are little stars for 2019 to 2021, those are Years 1 and 3 of the gauge change, 2022 that is the vent change year, and then 2023 is the maximum change year. Essentially what we're seeing here is that for each year of the Change the landings lose those smallest previously legal-size lobsters.

You can see the orange curve essentially shifted to the right relative to the Unchanged gray curve. The weight of the landings increased as they shift to larger sizes compared to the Unchanged scenario. This sort of stabilizes after, about Year 4, so we start to see the same outcome after Year 4 of the implementation schedule.

This table is showing for Years 2018 through 2030. The first column there is the difference in number and then the right-hand column is the difference in weight. Again, these percentages, these numbers are all in comparison to the Unchanged scenario value for that year. Again, I've highlighted the gauge changes event using the max size change happens.

What we're seeing here, each year of that Change the catch decreases in both the numbers and the weight relative to the Unchanged. But then there is a little bit of a recoup in the alternate years. In 2019, the first year of the Change you can see that drop in catch numbers and in catch weight, 2020 it is not as big of a difference, so they've recouped a little bit.

This happens more in the weight than in the numbers, because those lobsters are growing into the newly harvestable size range they really weigh more. You can see essentially as the

implementation schedule plays out that the values tend to stabilize after Year 4, after that vent change year. Ultimately, what we're seeing here is about a 4 to 5% fewer in numbers in the catch, but 6% higher in weight in the catch. Again, that is in comparison to the Unchanged scenario.

This slide shows the market categories. We thought it would be useful to have a look at what this does to the different market categories. The graphic on the right, Chicks are in the yellow color, Quarters are in the green, Halves are in the blue, Selects in orange and then Jumbos in the black. On the bottom the X axis is here, so this is only showing 2018 through 2025.

The left-hand side of the graph is the Unchanged scenario; the right-hand side of the graph is the Changed scenario. What we're seeing here is that the impact to the market category is happening mostly in the Chicks, Quarters and Halves. We see the percent of the landings that would be considered Chicks decreases from around 50% in the Unchanged scenario to around about 33% in that Changed scenario.

Then the Quarters increases about 27% of the composition to about 35% of the composition. The Halves increases from around 11% to around 16%. You see a little bit of change in the Selects and the Jumbos are mostly unchanged. Essentially, you lose a little bit out of the Chicks and then essentially you catch them back as they've grown into the Quarters and the Halves categories.

This is reference abundance and spawning stock biomass. The table on the left is the change in reference abundance, the table on the right is the change in spawning stock biomass. Again, the values in the table are in comparison to the Unchanged scenario. Essentially what we're seeing again, you are protecting the smaller individuals. Essentially, that is keeping them in that reference abundance, so reference abundance starts to increase after the first year of Change relative to the Unchanged scenario.

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

Once that implementation schedule has sort of played out, ultimately what we see is about a 16% increase in the reference abundance, and then about a 46% increase in spawning stock biomass compared to the Unchanged scenario. Reference abundance, it's mostly sizes from minimum legal size to around 90 millimeters that are being impacted in the reference abundance.

In the spawning stock biomass, it is a broader size range that is affected, up to about 120 millimeters, and this is essentially a combination of the size change along with increasing maturity at minimum sizes, and then the females were able to egg out and get v-notched, and so they gain those extra protections from the egg bearing and the v-notch status.

Then just again as a reminder, there is no stock recruit feedback relationship here so we are not trying to model any kind of supplements, egg production and young-of-year settlement, and then ultimately recruitment based on these new projections. Looking at exploitation.

The graph essentially is showing in the black line that is the Unchanged scenario, and then the orange line is the Changed scenario. This is for years 2018 through 2030, and it is just the exploitation, which is landings and by reference abundance. You can see the newest individuals here are no longer being landed, but they remain in Reference Abundance, so essentially these results decrease expectations compared to the Unchanged scenario. The results of simulation suggest that implementation of the management changes would decrease exploitation below the overfishing threshold.

This table essentially shows a comparison in 2021 the TC did an analysis, I think in support of developing Addendum XXVII, and we were asked to provide values for what happens to the catch in numbers, catch in weight, what happened to the spawning stock biomass, so pretty similar request.

There were pretty big differences, but there were definite differences between what we did in '21 and what we've done with this current analysis, in terms of the parameters that we used. Things like the size resolution. I mentioned earlier that we had to go to a 1-millimeter resolution in our size bins in order to pull this off.

The 2021 analysis we did not do that; we stuck with the 5-millimeter size bins. The other things that are different are, we've got differences in growth, maturity, selectivities and recruitment, all of these things coming from the updated 2025 stock assessment. Then in the 2021 analysis we did not include any escape vent aspect with that.

If you look at the table, essentially this gives the estimated ultimate impact. Again, this is once that implementation schedule has sort of played out. This is where we end up. You can see they are pretty similar. The eventual results are really similar in directionality as what we did in the past, and you see a decrease in the catch by numbers but ultimately an increase in catch by weight.

The difference in scale is not very big at all. The two analyses essentially told a very similar story. Maine DMR, what they did here is to look at just the impact of the very first gauge change, so that first year of implementation going from 3-1/4 to 3-5/16 of an inch or from 83mm to 84mm.

The data they used was from 2016 to 2021; this is from again the Maine Sea Sampling Data. The graph on the right shows along the X axis is the fishing zone going from Zone G all the way up to Zone A. The different shades of green are different Quarters, so light green is January through March, the darkest is October to December.

Then the value of the percent decrease in the trip catch weight. You can see it by Quarter and then the black line with the numbers above it 7.48, 7.7 et cetera, those are the Quarter combined estimates of decrease. Again, so this is very much focused on that first-year impact. What you can see here with the impact in that first year did vary by quarter and by Maine fishing zone.

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

Essentially the range of estimates was from about 7.4% to about 8.9% decrease in trip catch weight. This is actually pretty similar, it is just slightly higher of an impact estimated than what we got with the simulation exercise that I just showed you for that first year of Change. The simulation analysis estimated about a 6.6 decrease in weight in Year 1. That is just a little bit below what the Maine DMR analysis is giving us here.

In summary, the simulation studies that we've run here show that implementation of management changes ultimately resulted in an increase in reference abundance and in spawning stock biomass compared to the Unchanged scenario. Nearly all of these estimated impacts were driven by increases in minimum legal size, not the decreases in max size, and this is primarily because the vast majority of the Gulf of Maine/Georges Bank stock are smaller than the sizes that are impacted by the maximum size changes.

The impacts are more pronounced in spawning stock biomass than in abundance, because at their sizes that are impacted at minimum legal size, the proportion of females that are mature is rapidly increasing, so little changes in the legal size get you really big changes in the proportion of females that are mature.

This allows many more mature females to spawn prior to harvest, and then those mature females gain the additional protections by becoming egg bearing and for those that are v-notched they get that v-notch protection. Ultimately, landings numbers decrease, but the weight of these increases relative to the Unchanged scenario.

Catch does decrease in the implementation years, but once the changes have completed, so once the implementation schedule has played out, the protected lobsters grow into the larger harvestable size range and you harvest them at bigger weights. The market category, Chicks are

to some extent replaced by Quarters and Halves.

Then we did see an exploitation estimated to decline below the overfishing threshold. Now on this last point I do want to make a note here. If you remember, gauge change was, so the real gauge change with Addendum XXVII was delayed until 2025. The implementation was ultimately not going to happen until 2025.

The assessment terminal year was 2023. If the gauge change had ultimately not been revoked and had played out, that would have happened after the assessment had already been finished. The outcome of the assessment would not have been effective had the gauge changes actually gone through as originally planned. It just the gauge changes sort of started us in the right direction, in terms of decreasing exploitation. That's all I have; I can take questions.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Thank you, Tracy, and thank you for the response to the Board's request. That was a lot of hard work and I appreciate the document and all the analyses. I am going to open it up to the Board for questions. First, I see Jason McNamee.

DR. JASON McNAMEE: Thanks, Tracy, and also Happy Star Wars Day, Tracy.

DR. PUGH: May the 4th be with you!

DR. McNAMEE: This was just amazing work. This was like so fun to read and kind of think about. Thanks to the Technical Committee and all the folks who worked on this, really, really appreciate it. This is just maybe kind of digging into the weeds. It just wasn't clear to me. The question that I kind of was left with was, and you mentioned this.

You didn't model recruitment, but I think I read in the documentation that you could make an assumption that recruitment would see a benefit. The part that I was having a little trouble making that connection to was, so you expand your spawning stock biomass, and that would be a benefit. You would conceivably get more recruitment, all of the other environmental things

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

going on notwithstanding. But the part that I was struggling with was, you kind of shift the harvest into larger size classes.

Like you showed that in that stacked bar plot there, you know the harvest goes down in the Chick category but goes up in the bigger ones, except for Jumbos. Do you still get that expansion in SSB, or is there some offset because you've shifted the harvest to the bigger sizes? Hopefully there is a question in there that you can make sense of.

DR. PUGH: Yes, I think so. I think if we want to flip back to that market category slide it might be useful. It's essentially these are, so the catch in numbers goes down a little bit. You are not landing as much individuals, and those individuals that you are landing are bigger, they are heavier. I'm trying to wrap my brain around how to express what I think you're asking about and the answer to it, Jay.

Like spawning stock biomass goes up. The harvest here is switching, so those animals that you do land end up being a little bit larger. The market category definitions don't change, it's just you don't land as many in the Chicks category, because now more of them have gotten bigger before you land them. There is more distributed in Quarters and Halves.

The SSB going up essentially will put more eggs and larvae in the water. Then like you said, then the environmental things kind of come along and play out as to how many of those actually successfully settle into young lobsters and live to grow up, which is what we did not model? I think I wandered all around the question, Jay. I'm not entirely sure I actually answered it.

DR. McNAMEE: Yes, maybe just a quick follow. Is it your sense that the SSB increase out paces kind of the harvest? The harvest goes down as you guys showed overall, but you do get, you know this expansion and the weight of harvest. I guess that was, I am trying to figure out if the

expansion of the population outpaces that kind of shift onto the older lobsters, I guess. Maybe its not answerable and that's the problem.

DR. PUGH: I mean I think we're using the F estimates from the assessment timeline, so we're not... Jeff, if you've got a clear answer to this to help me with my struggles, it would be appreciated.

MR. JEFF J. KIPP: Yes, what I can add to that is, I think if you look at the SSB increases in that table it will stabilize. After a number of years as these changes go in and things change in the exploitation of lobsters at different size categories, you'll see those fluctuations in SSB. But as you get a year or two beyond the implementation of these changes, the SSB stabilizes.

I would interpret that as things sort of level out, not necessarily that the population is outpacing the growth and the weight of the population is outpacing the weight removed by the fishery. I think it all kind of finds its way, works its way out and then stabilizes. That is why you see that in the longer-term projections of SSB.

DR. PUGH: Thank you, Jeff.

MS. ZOBEL: Next up I have David Borden.

MR. DAVID V.D. BORDEN: I have some general comments, but I'm going to stick with the questions, because that is what you asked for. Basically, the question Tracy is since it shifts the size structure of a population, did the Technical Committee look at any of the marketing implications of that at all, any of the economics? Jeff is shaking his head no.

MS. PUGH: No, we did not. I think that marketing and economic exploitations are a little bit outside of our wheelhouse. I think that would be something that would be a next stage, but no, we did not look at that.

MR. BORDEN: That's my only question, but I've got some comments when you're ready.

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

MS. ZOBEL: Roy Miller.

MR. ROY W. MILLER: David covered my question, thanks.

MS. ZOBEL: Next, to Carl Wilson.

MR. CARL WILSON: Good morning, and thanks again for a very informative report. My question is around the changes in spawning stock biomass with the weight 6 % increase over the 7 years of the simulation. Do you have off the top of your head, or could we get what the loss in spawning stock biomass was during the last assessment period? I know we concentrate a lot on abundance, but how much if this had gone forward, would we have offset the natural declines in the population that we've seen?

DR. PUGH: I don't have those numbers right off. Spawning stock biomass did come down, the assessment results showed. Again, it is important to remember, Carl, the implementation schedule here. If it had gone through, I think it would have been like July 1st would have been when the gauge-change actually went through. That would not have made any changes to the outcome of the stock assessment.

But yes, I mean you see here that relative to the Unchanged scenario you do see a pretty dramatic increase to spawning stock biomass here. Whether that would have been enough to sort of either stabilizes or offset declines that we did see with the assessment, I'm not sure this analysis doesn't really ask that question. Jeff, do you have anything to add to that?

MR. KIPP: One of the things we did here is we kind of adjusted the timeline, so the timeline doesn't necessarily match what the reality of the implications schedule would have been. That is because of our uncertainty in recruitment and those reasons. If I'm thinking through your question, it would be, basically, if this had played out in real time, what would we

have seen the SSB do? I think to answer that question we would probably have to move that implementation timeline to say, in reality if we had kind of put in these regulation changes. Go ahead.

MR. WILSON: I guess I was just looking at the simulation where it's going from 2018 through 2023, which is roughly the timeframe of the last assessment. During that last assessment we saw a change in spawning stock biomass. Just wondering what that delta was.

DR. PUGH: I don't know what the delta was. I am getting a little bit of feedback here from Burton, who did the bulk of these analyses. With this analysis starting in 2018 as the start point. If you think of the Unchanged scenario as being sort of status quo, and the Change scenario being, okay if we had made these changes starting in 2018, then yes, we might have been a little bit above. We wouldn't have not seen the decreases in spawning stock biomass that we did.

MR. WILSON: Thank you.

DR. PUGH: I think that is my understanding of what Burton was trying to tell me via text here. Thank you, Burton. This is a team sport.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Go to Bob Glenn.

MR. BOB GLENN: Tracy, question for you. Did the TC assume that fishing effort remained constant in this analysis?

DR. PUGH: Yes, I think so. We used essentially the average quarterly F from the entire time series. The whole time series, going back to 1982. From what I understand is, that F, once we got that averaged by quarter, that F was applied to each quarter in the simulation constantly.

MR. GLENN: Just a quick follow up. Based on that, would you expect that any type of compensatory response in fishing effort in response to the gauge increases would impact the results? I guess my concern is that your results may be a little bit overoptimistic in the spawning stock biomass,

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

because in response to the initial reduction in landings if the industry were to ramp up effort to compensate for that, I suspect that some of those increases would be ameliorated.

DR. PUGH: I think that's plausible. It is really difficult to try to understand how the industry would react to changes, and to what extent they can recoup. But yes, I think that anytime we do these simulation analyses and we have to make assumptions and hold things. It is important to remember that these are estimates, and these are estimates making a fair amount of assumptions around both the environmental conditions that are sort of behind this that we're kind of holding stable in this instance, or fishing behavior.

MS. ZOBEL: I'm going to go to Burton online who has his hand up; I assume in relation to some of these questions we've been having.

DR. PUGH: Oh, great.

MR. BURTON SHANK: Bob, in response to your question. The time series mean for fishing mortality is 2.65, which equates to an exploitation rate of about 90%. There really isn't anywhere for industry to ramp up to. I mean that would take a lot to significantly increase that exploitation rate. Understanding that that is an exploitation rate that is defined differently than the way we use it in the stock assessment.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Steve Train.

MR. STEPHEN TRAIN: Dr. Pugh, I'm going to ask you to do a little forward thinking, if you don't mind, because it's where I'm looking at this. We didn't do any of this. This is what would have happened, it's where we would be theoretically. Is there any other tool in our tool box, the term we like to use so much, that could increase spawning stock biomass on a species that quickly with so little economic impact to the fishery? I'm just wondering if this continues a downturn where we go.

DR. PUGH: I think that is a reasonable question. I'm not sure that I can answer it, which is unsatisfactory for you guys, I'm sure. The TC is very focused on our analyses in relation to the resource itself. The economics are a challenge. We are not socioeconomic experts, so it is really outside of our wheelhouse.

But when you think about the tools that you do have in your toolbox, this is a quick and easy, and they do grow into harvestable range. I would say these are short term, relatively painful, but then the following years after the animals have grown into it then you recoup that in the weight. The other tools that you have to do this, you know I'm not sure, Steve, sorry.

I don't have a good response for that one. Cuts in traps would probably have to be extremely significant to start to see these kinds of gains, especially since with spawning stock biomass you're really getting these gains in increasing maturity in the size range. The middle legal size right now for Area 1 is right in the steepest part of that maturity ogive.

Like I said, little changes in the middle legal size right now gets you really big changes in the proportion of females that are mature as you go up that. That is why you see this rapid increase in spawning stock biomass, more so than you see it in reference then.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Any other questions at the moment from the Board? Jason, go ahead.

DR. McNAMEE: This is probably more of a comment than a question. I think I really appreciated this analysis. I think we've got some really good insights from it. Now I was just kind of thinking forward to the application, you know of this information. I guess it's on the agenda, so I won't jump ahead too far.

But I see this type of analysis in the work has been really helpful to potentially set some future management strategy evaluation. You know you

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

are kind of looking at these tradeoffs indirectly. It feels like a good sort of start to that type of analysis. I guess I take from this that some of the machinery to do this sort of thing is built already, which would be helpful.

I guess maybe the question part could be, if any of what I just said isn't accurate, I could be corrected. But I'll just offer that as a comment, seems like a nice step towards a management strategy evaluation, where we could look at tradeoffs between different management strategies that we might look at. It kind of gets back to the question that Steve just asked a moment ago too. You can sort of see, like catch that question that we ask.

DR. PUGH: Yes, just really quickly. I think that the work that Burton put into the really the growth, and dealing with getting from a 5-millimeter size to a 1-millimeter size then is a big step forward. I think that the TC was thinking about this exercise with the future in mind, in terms of being able to set ourselves up to answer questions like this moving forward.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Carl Wilson.

MR. WILSON: Just continuing on Jason's theme of how this can fold into our ongoing conversations and MSE evaluations in the future. But I think we do have a pretty significant economic question out there on what these analyses would do, whether it be for the market categories, as we've already talked about trade issues within the United States, trade issues between U.S. and Canada and abroad.

I guess a question for the Board is, I wasn't particularly planning on this but it seems relevant. Is there a group that we can pull together that might address some of the economic and market implications of this work, but also kind of in support of the MSE discussions, or is that the Subcommittee?

CHAIR ZOBEL: Yes, Carl let's say let's hold your question for right now, or that question back to

the Board, finish with the questions for Tracy and then we'll circle back, and I'll circle back to you, David, as well for comments. Are there any other questions for Tracy right not for the Board? I do want to go out to the public for a few questions, if there are any members of the public that have a question for Tracy around this report back to the Board. Okay, seeing no questions I'm going to go back to David for your comment, and then maybe Carl, we can have a brief discussion on that.

MR. BORDEN: I didn't want to do this before, but I would like to complement the Technical Committee on the fine work. I would say without a doubt this is the best work that I've seen done on this subject ever, and I don't think that is an exaggeration. I really think they have excelled at it.

I particularly like the fact that they tested it against a prior analysis and considered some parameters that were very different than had been considered in the prior analysis, and yet the results were basically validated in my own mind, the prior strategy. Now, I think that those of us around the table that have been at this for a long period of time can agree to disagree on the increments of change for regulations.

I think that was kind of fair game, but I particularly like the fact that the technical people standardized this based on a millimeter, which I think is a really reasonable way to affect change on a regulation of this order. I really take my hat off to the technical folks, outstanding work. I think we can take it a step further, as Carl Wilson indicated. I think we should look at some of the market implications of it. As Jason already said, maybe we can do that as part of an MSE or pull together a separate committee. Off the top of my head, I cannot think of another management measure that we could implement, especially if you implement it over gradually, two or three years a millimeter.

How you can implement a change that is going to increase the SSB to this extent with this little pain for the industry. Keep in mind, I think, and this goes back to the point that Carl raised. The SSB is

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

changing and egg viability is changing. There was a paper that came out here recently about ocean acidification and the potential impacts that has on egg viability.

There are a lot of good reasons to have larger size animals, we get their eggs and potentially increasing viability in a changing environment. I think ought to factor those types of points into the deliberation, and eventually figure out a strategy on how to move something ahead.

The last point is, if this had not gone out to the LCMTs I would request it be sent out to the LCMT members. I'm sure Carl has sent it out to his own council members, but if not then it should go to the Zone Council members at a minimum.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Carl Wilson.

MR. WILSON: Just a comment of kind of pulling us a little bit out of simulation and results into just a little bit of introducing some reality of, if we had implemented the gauge increase last year, as was proposed. As it was in 2025, we had approximately about a 10% decline in landings and a 20% decline in value.

If we had introduced another 5 to 10% decline in weight or numbers, we have an industry that is now in a point where the economics are very much stressing this fishery. The resource is declining, and without our understanding of the economic implications of some of these changes.

I think that we're asking and why I feel like we had such a pushback from industry is, we're asking them to make major changes without a good understanding of what those applications will be to their bottom line. That is a tough place for us to all be in at this point. We've seen it in other fisheries; we've seen it in other lobster fisheries. But that is just the reality we're in right now.

CHAIR ZOBEL: David.

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

MR. BORDEN: Just an added take off one of Carl's points, and I'm not disagreeing with that. I mean we really need the economic information on the impacts on the fishery, in terms of changing the size structure. I mean at least down our way we still have some dealers, particularly in New Bedford that grade and pay based on size.

You talk about shifting the catch from Chickens, which they don't pay much for, up into Halves and two-pound lobsters. If the price goes up like two dollars a pound, then it's going to buffer some of the negative impacts. We're going to need that type of guidance if we're going to consider this. I would also like to add to that that I think the question that Steve Train asked about what are the other mechanisms that we could utilize to manage the resource here, where we basically get equivalent benefits. I would love the technical people to talk about that some time on an agenda, to see what they could come up with for another strategy. I think that would feed into the process also.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Any other comments from the Board? With that, thank you, Tracy.

CHANGE IN LOBSTER CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT AREA 5 SEASON CLOSURE DATES

CHAIR ZOBEL: We can move on to the LMA5.

DR. PUGH: The second task that the Board asked us to look into was to review a proposal from LMA5 about shifting the timing of their seasonal closure. As a reminder, their current closure essentially is no lobster retention from February 1st through March 31st. There is a two-week grace period from February 1 through 14 to finish getting all the traps out of the water. Then there is a one-week period on March 4 through March 31 to set the traps.

Those traps can't be rehailed until April 1, but they can start getting the gear in the water. The proposal is essentially to shift their window so there is no lobster retention is from January 16 through March 15, and this proposal is all focused around

the increasing access to black sea bass. With that shift then the proposal would like to allow traps to be set and rehailed starting on March 9, and this is a set and rehaul, unlike the current.

This is 15 days early, and again this is to target black sea bass. This effectively shifts the timing of that lobster closure window earlier by two weeks. The TC, we don't have any landing or relevant time period in order to do analysis here. There is a little bit of landings data from January, but not really in March, in terms of what would come in March had we made this shift.

We had to focus on sort of a qualitative evaluation in discussion here. What we talked about is primarily a concern that shifting the timing could increase exploitation a little bit. The thought here is that catchability in March is likely higher than it would be in January, due to warming waters and increased activity of lobsters.

We recognize that this change in exploitation would likely be very small, but it is there nonetheless. Essentially what we came to suggest to the Board was that because this proposal is based on increasing access to black sea bass, we suggest that maybe the Board would monitor by the timing of the setting here to accommodate this request for black sea bass access.

Allow setting starting March 9, allow those traps to be rehailed for black sea bass harvest, but the lobsters have to be discarded. Maintain the current prohibition on lobster possession from February 1 through March 31, and we think that any bycatch in hauling for black sea bass, we're not really afraid that this is going to cause any discard related mortality to lobsters in this time of year. You know the animals should be all hard shelled, they are not molting during this time window. Trap discard for lobsters is assumed to be negligible or zero.

We don't think that this would have a big impact to lobster exploitation, but would allow the access for black sea bass as is driving this request. Yes, again, this may change the actions requested, but it also maintains the intended purpose of the seasonal closure to reduce lobster exploitation, which is coming from Addendum XVII. That is where we're at with this one, so anyone have any questions?

CHAIR ZOBEL: Thank you, Tracy, questions for Tracy. David Borden.

MR. BORDEN: I'm not sure this is a question for Tracy, but I'll try. Is there any reason they can't, these individuals can't set black sea bass pots in this area? In other words, they want to get access to said lobster pots so that they can catch these black sea bass, is the way I understand the situation. But they are not prohibited from setting black sea bass pots, as long as they don't possess lobsters, is that correct, Caitlin?

MS. CAITLIN STARKS: There is a period where the pots, that are also tagged for lobster, cannot be set during that closure period.

MS. ZOBEL: Go ahead, John Clark.

MR. JOHN CLARK: Thanks to the TC for analyzing this. Do you need a motion for us to move ahead with this?

CHAIR ZOBEL: It depends what the Board wants to do. If you want to move forward with some sort of management action then yes, I do believe you would need a motion. Caitlin.

MS. STARKS: I guess just to provide some context or options. The LMA5 Plan was approved as a conservation equivalency plan by the Board from Addendum XVII. If you wanted to make a change to the rules for LMA5 you could do it without an addendum.

That process would probably be you would want to task or maybe have the LCMT for Area 5 meet and provide a proposal to be evaluated as a conservation equivalency, which with the TC

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

suggestion we could kind of do a conservation equivalency there, because there isn't an expected change in mortality from the discards. But it would have to be evaluated by the TC, approved by the Board and brought back at a future meeting as an official conservation equivalency.

Then the other option is to initiate a management action if you wanted to expand it outside of that. That said, any of these things would have to then go through a federal rulemaking process with NOAA. You could make a change to our state waters rules, but it would also have to be made in the federal regulations.

MR. CLARK: Well then with the fastest method, I mean they sound pretty lengthy if we went through all that. If the Board did decide to push forward with this, because I know in Delaware I spoke to our fishery, or at least half of it. Mike, you probably did the same in Maryland. The fishery is onboard with this, so is there a way we could move to start this process going now, rather than going through the Team Meeting?

CHAIR ZOBEL: Toni, go ahead.

MS. KERNS: John, we strongly advise you to have an LCMT meeting before you bring us a conservation equivalency plan, because we would want to make sure that all of the states have spoken to their industry. If indeed the process is that you just want to not be able to possess lobster during this time, as the conservation equivalency then that is fine.

We would still need, and the reason why we're saying have your LCMT meetings, is because there are guidelines in terms of when we do conservation equivalency it is like who needs to meet, when they need to meet, when those conservation equivalencies need to be put forward so the Board can consider them.

One of them is the Advisory Panel, but in this case, I would suggest it just be the LCMT since it

is this very one specific issue for Area 5, and then we would move forward in that way. But again, this process will take a longer period of time, because it has to go to federal rulemaking.

MR. CLARK: How do we then start this process? Who convenes LCMT for 5 to meet?

MS. KERNS: The states do.

MR. CLARK: Okay, so we could set up a meeting anytime.

MS. KERNS: Correct, and just be cognizant of, and I can send you or Rich, whoever, and Joe the Conservation Equivalency Guidelines, which has all the timings that you need to meet in order to get the issue before the Board at the August meeting.

MS. ZOBEL: Sounds like the action there is for those states to get together, have a discussion and convene the LCMT for Lobster Management Area 5.

MS. KERNS: Correct, and remember it is the states that hold the list of the LCMTs, the Commission does not hold that list, so you all decide who sits on the LCMTs not the Commission.

MS. ZOBEL: Mike Luisi.

MR. MICHAEL LUISI: Since we're at the Lobster Board talking about black sea bass, I wonder how does this get communicated to the Black Sea Bass Board, Black Sea Bass, Scup, Summer Flounder Board, and does that Board need to be involved in any way, shape or form?

MS. KERNS: I don't believe so, Mike, because it's the subject of the permit, which is through NOAA, the Area 5 waiver permit, which makes these traps lobster traps.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Eric Reid.

MR. ERIC REID: Since we are talking about black sea bass and now fluke and everything else on the Lobster Board. My only concern, and I don't have an answer is, if those pots are there two weeks

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

earlier, what does that do with gear conflict in the trawl fishery, which may be in that area at the same time? If you're going to think about opening the area a little earlier, you're going to have to consider that.

CHAIR ZOBEL: I know we run into that plenty of times in other fisheries, where there is a change made and somebody has established a fishery during that season. Very good point. Any other questions? Doug Grout.

MR. DOUGLAS E. GROUT: Not so much a question, but I just hope when the states pull together their LCMT 5 that they bring forward both the original proposal and then what the suggested easier fix that the TC put forward, so they can look at both and see which would be easiest to implement.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Noted, thanks. Any other questions? Toni, go ahead.

MS. KERNS: It's not a question, but I don't know how important it is for these individuals to retain lobster or not, but I believe we can drop that permit in selection for a year, and they could just fish for their sea bass. But if they want to continue to retain lobster then they wouldn't want to drop that permit. But if I'm speaking out of turn, Alli, please.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Alli Murphy, go ahead.

MS. ALLISON MURPHY: Yes, the lobster permit is limited access, so you do have to renew it or you're going to lose that eligibility. You know someone, I think there are ways and that industry could not renew it until later in the year, potentially. I think there is a 45-day window to make changes to your federal permit. I think there is some flexibility there. But I think if folks pursue that they should be aware that if you don't renew your federal permit for a year, you would lose that.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Any other questions or comments? Since I did it with the last one, I will

go out and see if there are any public questions or comments on this. Seeing none in the room and none online. Thank you, Tracy, very much, echoing everybody's comments about the good work that the TC has done.

We tasked you with many, many things over the last few years, and the TC has always answered far above what we've requested, so thank you.

CONSIDER MANAGEMENT STRATEGY EVALUATION STEERING COMMITTEE NOMINATIONS

CHAIR ZOBEL: The next item on our agenda is to Consider Management Strategy Evaluation Steering Committee nominations. Go to Caitlin Starks for this.

MS. STARKS: I just want to remind everyone why we're discussing this today. But this stemmed from when the Board reviewed the 2025 benchmark stock assessment last fall, and the stock status for the Gulf of Maine/Georges Bank stock is not depleted, but the assessment did indicate that abundance had declined by 34% from that time series high that was seen in the 2020 assessment.

At that meeting the Board tasked the Technical Committee with updating its previous guidance on the process for initiating a management strategy evaluation or MSE for the Gulf of Maine/Georges Bank stock, which the Board reviewed at the last meeting this winter. As first steps toward the development of a Gulf of Maine/Georges Bank Lobster MSE, the Technical Committee provided two recommendations. The first one was to form a Steering Committee for scoping and coordinating the development of an MSE process, which would include the process to illicit management objectives from a variety of stakeholders as a first step.

The recommended representation on such a Steering Committee would include Board members, TC members, Commission staff, members of the Commission Committee on Economics and Social Sciences or CESS, industry, stakeholders, preferably with experience participating in the fisheries management process, and members of the

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

Commission's Assessment and Science Committee or Management and Science Committee with past experience in MSE.

The Technical Committee also noted that the number of people on the Steering Committee that they recommended was about a dozen members to keep the group effective, and that it could be populated through a call for nominations and approved via Board action. The second piece of the Technical Committee recommendation is to begin a formal process to develop management goals and objectives for the future of the Gulf of Maine/Georges Bank lobster fisheries.

The TC recommended that the Steering Committee would be responsible for designing and developing this process, and that it would likely include a series of meetings, both at local scales, like state management zones or LCMAs and at a regional stock wide scale. The Steering Committee would provide guidance on the spatial scale and the number and content of the stakeholder meetings.

The Technical Committee also emphasized that while this type of management objective process is a necessary precursor to starting an MSE process, it wouldn't commit the Board to pursuing an MSE. The outcomes of this type of process could be beneficial no matter what direction the Board goes ultimately with MSE for lobster.

Taking all of that into consideration, the Board did agree to form a Steering Committee and these are the individuals that have been nominated to serve on this Steering Committee, and I'll just read them out so they are on the record. From the Board we have Carl Wilson, Renee Zobel, Jason McNamee and Bob Glenn.

Then from the TC, Kathleen Reardon, Tracy Pugh, and Burton Shank, Todd Guilfoos from the CESS, industry stakeholders are John Drouin, Richard Howland, John Jordan Jr., Michael Flannigan, Beth Casoni, Brendan

Adams, and Hank Soule, and then from ASMFC staff, Jeff Kipp and myself.

A couple of notes on the proposed membership. First, there are more than 12 nominees here, so just noting that. However, the states as they were providing recommendations for Steering Committee members agreed that it would be important to have industry representation from the beginning of this whole process, and noted the need to include representation from these different geographic areas that are represented here.

Then second, this Steering Committee would specifically be focused on developing a plan or a process for identifying the management objectives via industry meetings. If the Board were to pursue this process of meetings and holding get-togethers with industry, and then later move forward with a full MSE process, at that point it may be beneficial to reevaluate and possibly change the membership of the Steering Committee for that different purpose. Then this is a proposed, albeit probably over ambitious timeline for the work of the Steering Committee, assuming the Board approves the nominations today.

Staff thinks three meetings would be needed at a minimum and that they could be done virtually. The first of these meetings could occur maybe mid-June to review the existing management objectives, identify gaps given the current social and economic conditions facing the fishery, and discuss how to incorporate the existing management objectives into a new process.

Then a second meeting could occur to discuss the management objectives process, including a review of other examples that have been done, identifying the universe of stakeholders that would need to be involved, and outlining the structure, schedule and participants and objectives of each of the stakeholder meetings, and determining the role of a facilitator.

Then in the later meeting, possibly September, the Steering Committee could meet to discuss the cost estimates, given the other details that have been

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.

The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

put together and recommended and develop the final report back to the Board. This proposed timeline would get that report out to the Board on the recommended management objectives process at the annual meeting. But that said, I will be up front, that it will likely be difficult to schedule meetings with this number of people, especially during the fishing season. This might be a challenging timeline and it might not be best to impose it as a strict timeline. That said, these are the actions for the Board to consider on this item, which are to approve the Steering Committee nominations and to provide guidance on that proposed timeline and objectives for that Steering Committee.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Does anyone have any questions for Caitlin before I entertain a motion. Carl, go ahead.

MR. WILSON: Just a question on the nature of the Subcommittee meetings, are they public? Can people listen in?

CHAIR ZOBEL: Yes, I think unless the Board were to specify that they wouldn't be public they would be public. That is our general policy. Jason McNamee.

DR. McNAMEE: Everything looks good. One question I had there, and I'm probably not understanding the way that you are kind of structuring the committee meetings. But I guess it is the June meeting in particular. I'm just wondering what you thought about sort of combining that into like the July meeting, for instance.

The reason is, I can see, so just kind of a review of existing objectives can potentially flow nicely into the subsequent process of adding to or modifying of something like that. Maybe I'm missing something else that is happening in the June meeting, but just wondering if we could combine those two.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Jeff Kipp.

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

MR. KIPP: Jay, I can take a shot at answering your question. I think the thought process there was, in addition to reviewing what is already on the books, what management objectives, identifying what the holes are. We also wanted to include some case studies of where this has been done for other species, to give this group some idea on path forward.

Then I think the thought process too was, when that group identifies what those gaps are, it would be good to have some time between that call and the next call to kind of brainstorm and think about those gaps, and bring those to the next call, we could more collectively over existing management objectives and more modern in future management objectives, sort of having a better idea of what those gaps are.

DR. McNAMEE: That makes perfect sense, thank you.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Eric Reid.

MR. REID: It's just a simple question, I think, which means it's probably complicated, right? You have one economist social scientist in the makeup of that committee, is that enough?

CHAIR ZOBEL: Jeff.

MR. KIPP: Yes, we think that is appropriate for the scope work for this group, which is essentially to identify what the landscape of these workshops looks like. When are they going to occur, what is the spatial scale, et cetera. We recognize that there is going to be a much broader universe of people that are going to have to be actually involved in those workshops.

That is one of the tasks of this Steering Committee, is to identify who all those folks are that need to be incorporated and included in these workshops that occur. We would plan to address a lot more economic experience and background at that point.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Any other questions? I would love to entertain a motion to kick us off here, if anybody has a motion to bring forward. Carl Wilson.

MR. WILSON: I **move to approve the nomination to the Steering Committee on Lobster MSE.**

CHAIR ZOBEL: Seconded by Jason McNamee, any rationale for either of you? It's pretty straightforward.

MR. WILSON: No direct rationale, other than I do appreciate the expanded membership to reflect some of the spatial variation within the fishery.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Okay, so any discussion on the motion from the Board? No discussion from the Board. I do see a member of the public with their hand up, so I am going to go ahead and take comment/question. Hank Soule.

MR. HANK SOULE: Thanks, Hank Soule; Atlantic Offshore Lobstermen's Association. Just a process question. If one of the nominees is unable to serve what happens then?

CHAIR ZOBEL: Bob, go ahead.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR BEAL: The nominees came through the state, so I think if there is somebody that can't serve, the state has the ability to nominate a new individual and the Board can approve it.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Yes, and Hank, if you're looking for a meeting-by-meeting type situation. This is a very small workgroup, so we're really looking for a commitment from whoever is going to serve. It wouldn't make sense to switch people out in the middle of a 3-meeting process. All right, **is there any objection to the motion on the board? Seeing no objection the motion carries by consent.** Next up is a report from the Gulf of Maine states on industry surveys and

meetings. Let's go north to south this time, so Carl Wilson, you are up first.

MR. WILSON: Well, we once again have had another round or are in the middle of another round of Lobster Zone Council meetings, where the topic of the day continues to be around how the fishery is performing and what the status of the resource is. Within our Lobster Advisory Council, we also had a subcommittee formed, or a portion of the Lobster Advisory Council started to work up a series of initiatives that would be commonsense or relatively kind of easy wins, is how they were described.

Our technical staff within the department is going back and trying to provide some evaluation of what those might be. As an example, we're trying to use similar to what the TC report today was, where we're using potential gauge size increases as kind of a reference point for what these smaller measures might be, a small part of what that increase would have been.

We're looking at kind of shifting the harvest window, with kind of a shift in that size window. We're also looking at what a spun-up lobster hatchery supplementation program would be, and what the contributions of purchasing lobsters, v-notching them and release would be as well. These are programs that we've done in the past, but at relatively small scale.

Then we're also looking at the size, location and number of vents, and also the size and location of bio panels that allow lobsters to escape if the trap is lost. Like I said, we have another Lobster Management Council mid-May, and we hope to be presenting some technical analysis on those small measures. Conversation continues in Maine.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Thanks, Carl, I'll be extremely brief. Right after the February meeting we had the opportunity to present back to our industry association the results of our lobster industry survey, which were all presented to the Board, very

similar amongst the three states, and so we continue to have dialogue. Go ahead to Bob Glenn.

MR. ROBERT GLENN: Thank you, Madame Chair, I'll be even briefer. I have nothing new to report at this time to the Board.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Okay, does anyone have any burning questions for the three of us on our updates? Seeing no questions.

CHAIR ZOBEL: We are moving on to an Update on a Request for Information or RFI for Alternative Gear Marking Framework, Alli Murphy.

UPDATE ON REQUEST FOR INFORMATION FOR ALTERNATIVE GEAR MARKING FRAMEWORK

MS. MURPHY: I also just have a brief update for you all. The request for information notice, last time I think I reported that we were drafting it, is now in review. Again, like I said at the last meeting, I'm hoping that at your summer meeting we'll have a more detailed update to give to you all.

CONSIDER OUTSTANDING MANAGEMENT CHANGES

CHAIR ZOBEL: We will now consider Outstanding Management Changes. Caitlin, go ahead.

MS. STARKS: I'll try to remind everyone what this is about, since it is kind of a confusing title. But at the last meeting there was a request for staff to provide the Board with a summary of any management changes that had been recommended in previous discussions as a Board, or with the Lobster Conservation Management Team, so that the Board could be aware of those and consider them for a future management action.

I went through the meeting minutes and LCMT summaries from the past several years and

pulled together a list of those. For LCMA 2 and 3, these recommendations came from the LCMT meetings that were held a few years ago to provide input on the NOAA Fisheries rulemaking on Area 2 and 3 Ownership path and trap cap reductions, which was responding to the Commission Lobster Addenda XXI and XXII. That rulemaking has since been withdrawn so, in federal waters the caps were not implemented.

The recommended measures for Area 2 were to allow harvesters to maintain a maximum of 2 permits with 800 traps each for a total of 1600 traps, rather than an ownership cap of 800 traps, and this would allow the possibility of banking up to 800 traps in addition to the cap of 800 active traps. There was also a suggestion at the LCMT 2 meeting to allow the transfer of traps between permits owned by a single entity, without the 10% conservation tax.

Then for Area 3 the LCMT recommended not raising the active trap cap as described in Addendum XXI, and that would mean maintaining an active trap cap of 2,000 traps. They also recommended not reducing the ownership cap as described in Addendum XXII, and the maximum ownership cap is 5 times the individual permit cap. Then lastly of course there is the management change for Area 5 that was discussed earlier today to change the lobster fishery closure dates. But that is the list of items that I was able to pull.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Thanks for the report back to us on that. Any questions for Caitlin on that? Dave Borden.

MR. BORDEN: I would just like to thank Caitlin and Toni for doing that. I was the one that asked the question at the last Board meeting, and Caitlin and I have already had this exchange. There are a number of other ideas that have been circulating both within Area 3 and Area 2, and I'm sure that other areas will come forward in the future with other suggestions. I just look at this as a living document. I don't think we need to do anything. You can stick it on the shelf, and as additional ideas come forward from the industry, I think we should

These minutes are draft and subject to approval by the American Lobster Management Board.
The Board will review the minutes during its next meeting.

add to it, so that at some point we can do a comprehensive addendum, so thank you very much.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Any other Board members? Okay, seeing none.

REVIEW AND POPULATE ADVISORY PANEL MEMBERSHIP

CHAIR ZOBEL: We are going to go to Tina to review and populate the Advisory Panel membership.

MS. TINA L. BERGER: For the Board's consideration I offer the appointment of Christopher Townsend, a professional pot fisherman from Massachusetts. He replaces Eric Lorentzen, who was previously on the panel.

CHAIR ZOBEL: Do we have a motion to do so? Bob Glenn.

MR. GLENN: I **move to approve the nomination of Chris Townsend from Massachusetts to the Lobster Advisory Panel to replace Eric Lorentzen.**

CHAIR ZOBEL: Do we have a second? Seconded by Joe Cimino. Anything else to add? Good, okay. Any discussion on the motion. **Is there any objection to the motion on the board? Seeing no objection the motion carries by consent.** All right, one final item. Do we have any other business to come before the Board today? Dennis Abbott.

MR. DENNIS ABBOTT: We had a lot of discussion about moving forward with lobster management and maybe increasing gauge sizes et cetera, and during the last iteration of this there was considerable discussion about the Canadian involvement. Are we going to ignore that as we move along, are we going to inform them at a much later date that we've done something or are doing something, or should

there be some sort of parallel path working with the Canadians?

In my own mind I can see with the relationships between the two countries, that I don't know how they will be amenable to anything we do. It seems like that should be part of our considerations, because it was in the past. I didn't know where to bring that up earlier, but that has been on my mind.

CHAIR ZOBEL: We'll just say we're not taking off any actions right now, we have these work groups that are kind of the precursor to a potential Management Strategy Evaluation. The economic piece, a number of people have already, and I agree is an important component for analysis, as well as kind of these market components, including the relationship of Canada.

I perceive before anything would move forward that we need to move forward with a number of those things, but we don't have anything before us right now that drives that direct conversation. But Toni, you had your hand up. Was there anything you wanted to add? No, okay. That is my understanding and kind of how I see it. If anyone disagrees with me, kind of raise your hand on that.

ADJOURNMENT

Thank you for bringing it up, Dennis. Any other business to come before the Board? We are adjourned, thank you.

(Whereupon the meeting adjourned at 12:10 p.m. on Monday, May 4, 2026)

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

American Lobster Management Objectives Process Steering Committee Meeting 1 Summary

Monday, June 8, 2026

2:00 - 5:00 p.m.

The American Lobster Management Objectives Process (MOP) Steering Committee (SC) met for its first meeting to begin addressing the items tasked by the American Lobster Management Board in its February 2026 motion:

Move to form a Steering Committee (SC) to:

1. Review existing management objectives, as outlined in Amendment #3 and subsequent addenda, relative to the current GOMGBK stock status, and social/economic conditions facing the fishery today.

2. Develop a process that would clearly identify new management objectives (across all stakeholders), to better understand socioeconomic status and concerns, and to identify potential management tools.

Representation on the SC shall follow recommendations outlined in the January 20, 2026, Technical Committee memo. The SC will recommend a process for both tasks for the August 2026 Lobster Management Board.

The meeting discussions are summarized below in the order of the agenda:

1. Welcome & Introductions

To start the meeting the members of the SC introduced themselves to the group. Staff provided guidelines for participating in the virtual meeting. All SC members were in attendance for the meeting, along with several other attendees (Appendix 1).

2. Steering Committee Purpose and Expected Products

Jeff Kipp provided an overview of the purpose and objectives of the SC, as outlined in the Board motion, along with expected products to be developed for the Board. The presentation also described the typical process for a Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE), which includes three general steps: 1) definition of management objectives; 2) conducting an MSE to determine relative performance of possible management strategies; 3) possibility for subsequent iterative process(es) to refine objectives. It was emphasized that the scope of work for this SC is to recommend a process for the completion of step 1, but not to provide recommendations or perform work related to the subsequent steps. The SC tasks are to review the existing management objectives, as outlined in Amendment 3 to the Lobster Fishery Management Plan (FMP), and to develop a process that would clearly identify new management objectives. It was clarified that this process is focused on the Gulf of

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

Maine/Georges Bank (GOMGBK) stock region and will not include the Southern New England region.

The SC discussed that the present task will not address the identification of management strategies, but the SC may recommend the timing during the MOP for discussing possible management approaches and getting stakeholder input.

3. Review Existing American Lobster Fishery Management Objectives

Caitlin Starks presented the management goal and objectives currently in Amendment 3 to the FMP. The SC discussed whether the recommended MOP should aim for the same level of specificity of these objectives. It was noted that objectives could be classified as “conceptual” or “means” objectives, with conceptual objectives being overarching objectives and means objectives being more specific and quantifiable statements of how conceptual objectives will be achieved. It was agreed that examples could be provided during the next meeting to provide the group with a better sense of the goal for this process, but that the SC should strive to address both of these objective types through this process to streamline a potential MSE later on. Jason McNamee noted it could be beneficial to separate objectives that can be quantifiably tested in an MSE and those that cannot. Bob Glen noted that some of the existing objectives conflict, and there is a lack of socioeconomic context in existing objectives that would need to be addressed.

4. Review of Other Management Objectives Process Examples

Ecosystem Management Objectives Workshop (EMOW)

Shanna Madsen presented on the EMOW that was conducted for Atlantic Menhaden in 2015. This process included convening stakeholders to define management objectives and associated measures of performance. The stakeholders met for an in-person workshop and provided input on fundamental (i.e., conceptual) and means objectives, as well as the performance measures that should be used to evaluate whether the objectives are achieved by management strategies. She noted that there has not been a full MSE for menhaden, but the objectives developed were helpful for guiding management.

Lessons learned from this process that could be helpful for the SC to consider included:

- The group size should be limited to a number that a facilitator can manage in a workshop, but there needs to be representation of important groups and perspectives.
- It can be challenging for the group to understand the purpose and scope of the workshop and stay focused on that.
- In advance of the workshop, the facilitator met with the stakeholders specifically to clearly identify goals and expected outcomes of workshop, which was very helpful.
- Meeting in-person versus over webinar is critical.
- It was very valuable to establish a strong timeline for project milestones and deliverables.

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

Additional materials from the EMOW process and development will be shared with the SC for reference after the call.

Horseshoe Crab Management Objectives Workshop

Caitlin Starks presented on recent stakeholder engagement processes carried out by the Horseshoe Crab Management Board: 1) a management objectives workshop in July 2024, and 2) a longer engagement process from September 2025 to May 2026, which was focused on developing recommendations to revise the values-based components of the Adaptive Resource Management model to better align with current stakeholder values.

Lessons learned from this process that could be helpful for the SC to consider were:

- It was beneficial to have the participants, as part of the application to be involved, sign an agreement to commit to participation guidelines, including attending all meetings and reviewing all background materials.
- Third-party facilitators bring fresh perspectives and could build trust with stakeholders when they do not have historical involvement with fishery and associated biases.
- Meeting location(s) and timing should consider accessibility for all stakeholders and accommodate their availability as much as possible.
- Trade-offs between group size and depth of discussion must be considered and weighed based on the goals of the meeting. Larger groups are very difficult to bring to consensus.
- It was beneficial for the facilitator to meet with some participants in small groups or individually before the workshop to better understand their specific perspectives and concerns.
- Establishing clear meeting objectives and preparing the participants in advance for the discussions and goals of the workshop was critical to success.

It was noted that the format and structure of this process for lobster management objectives may be very different from the menhaden and horseshoe crab examples. The Lobster Technical Committee suggestion for this process was to start with a series of meetings at smaller localized scales (e.g., state management zones) to capture as much input as possible, then have meetings with smaller groups of representatives across larger areas to refine that input.

Jason McNamee noted that in the Atlantic herring MSE process, he observed that there was a lack of continuity in participants across meetings, which created challenges for merging different ideas that emerged from each meeting.

Several SC members noted that it would be important to get input and guidance from a facilitator on developing the framework for this process.

5. Discussion: Identifying gaps in existing management objectives given social and economic conditions facing the fishery today

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

The SC discussed the current management objectives and noted several gaps that are not addressed. Below are the main topic areas identified by the SC as current gaps in the objectives:

- Socioeconomic vision for the fishery, including an improved understanding of baseline, current, and ideal conditions, and differences at local scales.
- Economics of the fishery
- Understanding relationships between the US and Canadian fisheries and trade, and how this should be addressed in objectives
- Consideration of trade-offs between uniformity and flexibility in management measures across areas.
- Fishery effort, including mechanisms for controlling it and current levels
- Consideration of different spatial scales for management (i.e., smaller scales than stock or LCMA)
- Objectives around communities (e.g., thinking about how whole communities are impacted by management, considering fishery reliance, equity, stability, etc.)

The SC suggested that objectives could be categorized into groups based on the focus and what they are intended to achieve, such as effort, fishing mortality, economics, etc. The SC noted that it seems like there is a critical need for individuals with expertise in lobster trade (e.g., dealers, wholesalers, etc.) and an understanding of trade impacts and interactions with Canada to be part of this process. It was suggested that the SC could look into other examples of fishery management in the US where Canada is involved, such as Pacific halibut and northeast groundfish.

6. Discussion: How to incorporate existing management objectives into current management objectives process

The SC discussed possible approaches for incorporating the current management objectives into a process to identify new objectives for management. Two approaches were suggested, but it was noted there may be other options: 1) a “blank slate” approach where the current management objectives are not presented, and stakeholders provide new objectives, or 2) presenting the current management objectives as a starting point and discussing how they should be modified.

Several SC members supported the blank slate approach and felt that it would allow for more valuable input and fresh ideas. The SC generally agreed that it would prefer to determine the best approach with guidance from a facilitator. It was noted that the SC providing a facilitator with a vision of where we are and where we want to get to would help support a facilitator get us to our end goal.

One SC member suggested using the results of the recent industry survey in Maine to frame discussions. It was also noted that it seems like the timeframe for this process could overlap with the timeframe for the upcoming Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team (ALWTRT) process, and that it may create challenges if these two processes are happening simultaneously.

7. Next Steps and Other Business

Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

The SC discussed agenda items for next meeting, including a deeper dive into the difference between fundamental and means objectives with examples, and how to involve LCMTs in this process. Several SC members felt strongly that the LCMTs need to be reconstituted and involved early on in the MOP.

The SC also reviewed a draft list of questions to guide the development of its recommendations (Appendix 2). These questions are meant to identify the information the SC should gather and provide to the Board in its report. The group added additional questions to the list related to appropriate meeting duration for participant learning curves, LCMT involvement, participant preparation, and ways to get input before meetings.

Before the next meeting, ASMFC staff will provide draft meeting minutes to the SC, create a Sharefile account for sharing meeting materials, and poll for the next meeting date.



LOBSTER CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT AREA 5

Lobster Conservation Management Team

MEMORANDUM

TO: American Lobster Management Board

FROM: LCMA 5 Lobster Conservation Management Team

DATE: July 22, 2026

SUBJECT: Recommendation to the American Lobster Management Board to change the starting date for setting black sea bass pots in LCMA 5 from March 24 to March 9

The newly reconstituted Lobster Conservation Management Team (LCMT) for Lobster Conservation Management Area (LCMA) 5 met remotely on July 21, 2026 to discuss advancing the starting date for setting black sea bass pots in LCMA 5 from March 24 to March 9. The LCMT members proposed this change because the availability of black sea bass LCMA 5 is now much earlier than the March 24 date set over ten years ago, so allowing black sea bass pots to be set earlier than March 24 will enable LCMA 5 permit holders more days to pot black sea bass. This black sea bass pot season change will not change the February 1 to March 31 lobster closure required by the FMP.

After a brief discussion, the LCMT approved the following motion for consideration by the American Lobster Management Board:

The LCMA 5 LCMT recommends that the American Lobster Management Board (Board) request that the NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office revise the LCMA 5 season to allow black sea bass pots to be set beginning on March 9 instead of March 24 while maintaining the current American lobster harvest closure (February 1 through March 31), as proposed by the American Lobster Technical Committee in its April 20, 2026 memo to the Board.

Motion by Mr. Townsend, seconded by Mr. Conti. The LCMT approved the motion by consent.

The LCMT urges the Board to approve this recommendation at its August 4, 2026 meeting so the recommendation can be forwarded to the NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office immediately, thus allowing as much time as possible for rulemaking before the 2027 season. Thank you.

Attachments:

Meeting Agenda

Meeting Minutes



LOBSTER CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT AREA 5

Lobster Conservation Management Team

AGENDA

1. Approval of Agenda
2. (Optional) Elect Chair and Vice Chair. This is a LCMT decision.
3. Discuss recommendation/proposal (term used in Amendment 3 to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan for American Lobster, 1997) to change the starting date for setting black sea bass pots and approve a motion to send to Board.

‘The LCMA 5 LCMT recommends that the American Lobster Management Board (Board) request that the NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office revise the LCMA 5 season to allow black sea bass pots to be set beginning on March 9 instead of March 24 while maintaining the current American lobster harvest closure (February 1 through March 31), as proposed by the American Lobster Technical Committee in its April 20, 2026 memo to the Board’.

4. Other issues/new business
5. Adjourn



LOBSTER CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT AREA 5

Lobster Conservation Management Team

Minutes of the July 21, 2026 Remote Meeting

LCMT Attendees

Carmen Conti, NJ
Wes Townsend, DE
Sonny Gwin, MD
Corey Gwin, MD

State Support Staff

Jeff Brust and Chad Power, NJ
John Clark and Rich Wong, DE
Mike Luisi and Matt Jagowsky, MD

ASMFC Staff

Caitlin Starks

The meeting was called to order at 6:05 PM.

The agenda was approved by consent.

The LCMT decided not to elect a Chair and Vice Chair since this was the first LCMT meeting in over 10 years and there was only one issue to discuss.

The LCMT discussed Agenda Item 3, the recommendation/proposal (term used in Amendment 3 to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan for American Lobster, 1997) to change the starting date for setting black sea bass pots and approve a motion to send to Board. One LCMT member stated that black sea bass arrive even earlier than March 9 so it would be better to recommend an earlier starting date than March 9, but the LCMT members then agreed that the March 9 date was the original request to the American Lobster Management Board and it had been reviewed by the American Lobster Technical Committee and thus had the best probability of being approved by the Board.

Mr. Townsend then made the following motion:

‘The LCMA 5 LCMT recommends that the American Lobster Management Board (Board) request that the NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office revise the LCMA 5 season to allow black sea bass pots to be set beginning on March 9 instead of March 24 while maintaining the current American lobster harvest closure (February 1 through March 31), as proposed by the American Lobster Technical Committee in its April 20, 2026 memo to the Board’

The motion was seconded by Mr. Conti. There was no further discussion of the motion and the motion was approved by consent.

The LCMT had no further business and adjourned at 6:25 PM.

Dated: July 9, 2026.

Christopher Abbott,

Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Negotiations, performing the non-exclusive functions and duties of the Assistant Secretary for Enforcement and Compliance.

[FR Doc. 2026–14291 Filed 7–15–26; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3510–DS–P

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648–XF749]

Request for Information on Ropeless Fishing; Fisheries of the Northeastern United States and Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice; request for information.

SUMMARY: NMFS is requesting information from fishery participants and others with specialized knowledge on the potential use of ropeless fishing gear, which includes on-demand fishing gear and other fixed gear that does not use persistent buoy lines. This information will inform any potential future use, development, and management of these systems in fisheries in the Greater Atlantic Region. NMFS intends to summarize the responses to this request for information and share that summary publicly.

DATES: Responses are due on or before October 14, 2026.

ADDRESSES: You may submit comments on this document, identified by NOAA–NMFS–2026–2080, by the following method:

- *Electronic Submission:* Submit all electronic public comments via the Federal e-Rulemaking Portal. Visit <https://www.regulations.gov> and type NOAA–NMFS–2026–2080 in the Search box. Click on the “Comment” icon, complete the required fields, and enter or attach your comments.

Instructions: When responding to this request for information, please label your response with the corresponding question number to which your input is directed. Comments sent by any other method than the one listed above, or received after the end of the comment period, may not be considered by NMFS. All comments received are a part of the public record and will generally be posted for public viewing on <https://www.regulations.gov> without change. All personal identifying information (e.g., name, address, etc.), confidential

business information, or otherwise sensitive information submitted voluntarily by the sender will be publicly accessible. NMFS will accept anonymous comments (enter “N/A” in the required fields if you wish to remain anonymous).

Copies of supporting documentation to this request for information are available online. The technical report *Evaluation of On-Demand Gear Acoustic Interoperability Approaches in the Northeast U.S.* by the MITRE Corporation, is available at https://library.oarcloud.noaa.gov/noaa_documents.lib/NMFS/On-Demand_Gear_Interoperability_Report.pdf. The Northeast Fisheries Science Center report *A Proposal for Functional Data Specifications of On-Demand Fishing Gear, Version 2* (Galvez, 2026) is available at https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/73583/noaa_73583_DS1.pdf.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Caroline Potter, Fisheries Resource Management Specialist, (978) 281–9325; caroline.potter@noaa.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

I. Introduction

Under the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, NMFS is required to, “in consultation with affected States and fishing industry participants, promote the innovation and adoption of gear technologies” (Division JJ, Title I, Section 101(a)(1)). The Act mandates this effort to implement “new regulations for the American lobster and Jonah crab fisheries consistent with the [Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and Endangered Species Act] that take effect by December 31, 2028, utilizing existing and innovative gear technologies, as appropriate” (Division JJ, Title I, Section 101(a)(2)).

Accordingly, NMFS is providing resources to support the development of ropeless fishing gear as a potential voluntary alternative for fixed-gear fishermen to operate in areas with persistent buoy line restrictions while minimizing risks to large marine mammals. NMFS continues to collaborate with fishermen, technology manufacturers, state agencies, fishery management organizations, and other partners to explore the benefits and limitations of these technologies. This request for information (RFI) is a key step of this ongoing effort to comply with the mandates of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023. This RFI does not limit NMFS’ ability to consider other innovative gear or management

activities and various management options are being considered.

Buoy lines connecting physical surface markers with fixed fishing gear—such as traps, pots, and gillnets—can become entangled with large whales, leading to the serious injury or death of the whale. Restricting the use of persistent buoy lines is one way to reduce the risk of entanglement for protected species, including North Atlantic right whales. Ropeless fishing gear substantially reduces entanglement risk and, if approved, could be used in areas with persistent buoy line restrictions.

In 2021, to comply with the requirements of the MMPA and respond to high rates of incidental deaths and serious injuries exceeding allowable limits, NMFS amended the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan (86 FR 51970, September 17, 2021). This rule restricted the use of persistent buoy lines in particularly high-risk entanglement hotspot areas during times of the year when North Atlantic right whales and persistent buoy lines are most likely to co-occur.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, requires NMFS to implement “additional whale protection measures by December 31, 2028,” (Division JJ, Title I, Section 101(a)(1)). If the best available scientific data shows that U.S. commercial fixed-gear fisheries continue to exceed the MMPA’s legal thresholds, new or modified times and areas where persistent buoy lines are restricted may be considered, including during right whale aggregations. However, if authorized by NMFS, fixed-gear fishermen could use ropeless gear to continue fishing in new or modified areas, as well as the previously restricted areas.

Currently, the regulations governing the operation of federal waters fisheries in the Greater Atlantic Region require all fixed fishing gear to have physical surface markers (buoy/high flyer with radar reflector/pennant) (e.g., 50 CFR 648 for Council-managed fisheries and part 697 for the lobster/Jonah crab fisheries). As a result of these gear marking requirements, any area that prohibits persistent buoy lines, but would otherwise allow fishing without those buoy lines, remains an area closed to fixed-gear fishing.

In 2025, the New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Councils initiated the Joint Omnibus Alternative Gear-Marking Framework Adjustment to consider whether to recommend that NMFS allow the use of fixed gear without physical surface markers in Council-managed fisheries if an equivalent alternative marking method

is used. NMFS is also considering whether to similarly modify the Federal American lobster/Jonah crab gear-marking regulations. If NMFS authorizes the use of gear-marking alternatives, such as digital gear markings, lobstermen could regain fishing access to current and any potential future restricted areas by using authorized ropeless fishing gear. Similarly, with these alternatives, fishermen could respond to sudden aggregations of large whales in an area by removing one or both endline(s), thereby reducing the likelihood of entanglement for the period of time the whales remain in an area. However, the Councils' action was postponed, pending additional input from stakeholders including the fishing industry. NMFS has, likewise, postponed action with respect to the lobster and Jonah crab fisheries to gather additional input and ensure consistency among the actions.

This RFI requests information specific to the program design, utility, limitations, and technical capability of ropeless fishing. It contains questions and associated context that were developed with a focus on Greater Atlantic Region operational and management considerations. However, NMFS also welcomes feedback informed by experiences where these gear alternatives are being used outside the Greater Atlantic Region. This RFI does not request comment on the number, size, location, or seasonality of any existing or future whale protection areas. The public will be notified if and when NMFS requests comment on those topics, which will occur through a different process and at a later time.

Description of Ropeless Fishing Gear

In this RFI, the term "ropeless" is used to describe all types of fixed-gear fishing that does not use persistent buoy lines. Therefore, ropeless fishing gear includes fixed gear rigged with an on-demand device or timed-retrieval device that triggers a retrieval mechanism. While gear rigged with these devices can still have ropes that are used to retrieve the gear, any buoy lines are only intended to remain in the water column for a short time during gear retrieval. Because ropeless gear refers to all fixed gear without any persistent buoy lines, it also encompasses fixed gear without one of these devices that can be retrieved by grappling. A string or trawl of fixed gear that uses a traditional, persistent buoy line on only one end is referred to as "one-end ropeless." The end without the persistent buoy line may or may not be rigged with an on-demand or timed-retrieval device and retrieval mechanism.

Both trap/pot and gillnet gear, as well as other fixed gear types, can be fished in a ropeless configuration. For on-demand and timed-retrieval devices, the line can be stowed on the ocean floor rather than vertically in the water column between the bottom gear and the surface marker. An on-demand device uses acoustic communication to activate a retrieval mechanism such as a pop-up buoy, inflatable lift bag, or buoyant-rope spool. Timed-retrieval devices are designed to function similarly, except they use a timer or galvanic link to activate a retrieval mechanism. All of these types of ropeless fishing gear can be marked using alternative gear-markings such as digital markings.

Section III of this RFI provides definitions of the terms used in this RFI.

Ropeless Fishing Gear's Functional Equivalence to Traditional Gear

Ropeless fishing gear that does not use persistent buoy lines and surface markers should reproduce the functions served by surface markers. Such functions may include, but are not limited to: Allowing ocean users to visually detect the location of the gear; conveying set direction; allowing the gear to be retrieved; conveying identifying information that is required by the relevant fishery (e.g., permit number); and allowing law enforcement to locate, retrieve, and redeploy the gear. Reproducing these functions allows fishermen and other ocean users to continue to operate in close proximity to the fixed gear while minimizing gear conflict. To achieve these functions, in part, ropeless fishing gear can be marked and visualized digitally. This RFI requests comment on how this should most effectively be accomplished.

II. Topics for Comment

1.0 Authorization of Ropeless Fishing Gear

Context

Through the Alternative Gear-Marking Framework Adjustment action, the New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils are considering when and where digitally marked gear could be allowed in its fixed gear fisheries. NMFS is concurrently considering whether to modify Federal lobster gear-marking regulations to relieve surface marking restrictions. During this process, the Councils received feedback highlighting the diversity of the fixed-gear industry, suggesting that regulatory changes must account for regional differences in fishing practices. In addition, other solutions such as grappling or removing

one endline have been suggested as potential solutions to reduce large whale entanglement risk. Therefore, NMFS requests comments on information that will help inform decision making.

Questions

1. What experience do you have with ropeless fishing gear?
2. Ropeless fishing gear: Under what specific environmental, seasonal, or operational circumstances should NMFS authorize the use of ropeless fishing gear? Conversely, under what circumstances should its use be denied?
3. One-end ropeless gear: Under what specific circumstances should NMFS authorize the use of one-end ropeless gear? When should it be explicitly denied?

4. Do you support the use of grappling-only ropeless fishing gear? What limitations or guidelines should accompany its use?

2.0 Safety and Performance of On-Demand and Timed-Retrieval Fishing Gear

Context

NMFS is working to develop standards that ropeless systems would need to meet to be approved for use in regular commercial fishing operations in the Greater Atlantic Region. Establishing these standards will help ensure that fishermen have a range of safe, reliable, and effective system options from which to choose.

Safety

Ensuring that ropeless systems are safe to use is of paramount importance. Ropeless fishing gear eliminates the persistent endlines that could otherwise entangle a crewmember during deployment. However, because there is no persistent buoy line immediately available, recovering a crewmember who becomes entangled in a groundline could be more difficult. Thus, while some note that ropeless gear reduces the initial risk of crewmember entanglement by eliminating the endline that can entangle the crew, others caution that it could decrease the chances of a successful recovery if a "man overboard" incident occurs from groundline entanglement.

Stakeholders have also raised operational safety concerns regarding the gear itself. These include the physical weight of the systems, the use of compressed air tanks, the hauling process, mechanical or digital failures, and premature releases. Additionally, safety concerns related to potential gear conflicts have been noted.

While there have been no documented safety incidents during on-demand research and trials conducted by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, developers are actively working on a “man overboard” feature that would immediately trigger the gear’s retrieval mechanism. One developer has implemented this feature with its on-demand gear. However, gear rigged with a timed-retrieval device or gear that requires grappling would not necessarily support this function, potentially limiting this safety option for those gear types. Concerns have also been raised about the safety of grappling for ropeless gear.

Questions

5. What are the human safety-related concerns with and benefits of on-demand fishing? How do these concerns and benefits compare with traditional fishing gear?

6. What safety requirements or standards should be considered as part of approving a ropeless system for use?

7. Is “man overboard” functionality helpful for improving safety? If so, should it be a mandatory requirement for some or all types of ropeless gear? Are there other features that could increase safety of ropeless gear?

8. How could timed-retrieval devices or grappling methods be modified to increase safety?

Successful Retrievals

Ensuring that on-demand or timed-retrieval devices function as intended is necessary for the safe and continued operation of the gear. When retrieving on-demand fishing gear, “success” is measured by the ability to acoustically communicate with the device on the seafloor, trigger the release mechanism, and retrieve the gear at the surface. The overall success rate is over 91 percent for trials conducted under an EFP by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center. Nearly every unsuccessful haul was retrieved by other means, such as grappling. Based on anecdotes from fishermen using traditional fixed gear—which is subject to loss from storms, vessel traffic, gear conflict, and other losses—this 91-percent retrieval rate of on-demand gear is at least as good as, if not better than, fishing with traditional fixed gear. For the EFP trials from summer 2020 to early 2026, fewer than 1 in 600 hauls have led to the loss of an on-demand device, a recovery rate of 99.8 percent. While the Northeast Fisheries Science Center is not currently testing timed-retrieval devices, a similar measure of success, such as retrieval rate, could be developed for that gear type. However, determining the

reliability of grappling may prove more difficult.

Questions

9. Should individual makes and models of ropeless fishing gear be subject to minimum reliability standards prior to approval for use? If so, how would you approach implementing this? Specifically, which components of a ropeless system (e.g., the release mechanism, the on-demand/timed-retrieval device, other) should be subject to minimum reliability standards? What success criteria and testing parameters (e.g., duration of deployment, depth, specific fishery conditions) should be used to evaluate reliability?

10. If a ropeless system no longer meets a reliability standard, what should the process be for re-approval?

11. Should fishermen be allowed to design and use their own rope containment systems to pair with approved on-demand or timed-retrieval release mechanisms or should complete-only designs be approved (with all or some modifications prohibited)?

12. Should there be a periodic inspection requirement to ensure gear safety or viability?

Premature Releases

On-demand or timed-retrieval systems have the potential to prematurely release. Tracking and reporting these premature releases is critical for at least two reasons: (1) It is important to know when and where buoy lines are present in the water column, especially if the area prohibits persistent vertical buoy lines; and (2) if a particular make and model of on-demand or timed-retrieval gear repeatedly releases prematurely, that information would be important for decision making, including device approval by NMFS.

Questions

13. Should fishermen be required to report premature releases of on-demand or timed-retrieval fishing gear?

14. Should premature release notifications be automatically sent to the gear owner and/or NMFS? Currently, this requires an additional device and increases the price of each ropeless system.

3.0 Alternative Gear Marking

Context

Currently, most vessel operators testing ropeless systems manually mark the gear’s location by a button-push using a gear manufacturer-provided digital application using a tablet or smartphone. This creates a digital mark of the gear’s position. However manual

entry is prone to error; an operator may forget to mark gear during deployment, resulting in missing or inaccurate location data. Additionally, an operator could intentionally log a digital marker without actually deploying gear, creating a false mark. Both of these scenarios decrease the reliability of data that other ocean users would rely on to operate near ropeless fishing gear and avoid gear conflicts.

Ropeless gear can be marked automatically. For example, surface markings can be automatically created when the gear is deployed into the water. In addition, some on-demand systems automatically mark the gear’s location on the seafloor via acoustic localization if the vessel is equipped with a through-hull transducer (although there may be other methods by which this functionality could be achieved). However, most systems do not currently have this capability and might only adopt it if it becomes a regulatory requirement. Furthermore, for fixed gear with physical surface markers, fishermen must estimate the location of gear on the seafloor based on the location of the buoys at the surface. Alternatively, acoustic communication can detect and mark the gear’s position on the seafloor. This method may provide more accurate and precise gear location markings than using a global positioning system (GPS) to mark the gear’s deployment location at the surface; however, it increases cost and technological complexity. Because gear density and the potential for gear conflict vary by region, it may be necessary to require the use of more precise location marking technology in certain areas. NMFS sponsored the technical report *Evaluation of On-Demand Gear Acoustic Interoperability Approaches in the Northeast U.S.* by the MITRE Corporation (see **ADDRESSES**), which, in part, examines localization accuracy requirements of ropeless gear.

Questions

15. How precisely do you need to know the geographic location of ropeless fishing gear to ensure safe operations and prevent gear conflicts (e.g., within 25 feet of the true location)? In what specific areas, depths, or fishery conditions do you need to have this level of location precision? Are there other areas, depths, or fishery conditions where you would need more or less precision?

16. Should ropeless systems be required to automatically mark their deployment locations to eliminate human error, or is manual input (e.g., via a mobile app or chartplotter) sufficient?

17. If manual marking is permitted, what measures or penalties should be considered to deter the creation of false marks or the failure to mark deployed gear?

18. How should NMFS balance the high cost and complexity of reliance on through-hull transducers for automatic acoustic marking against the need for highly reliable spatial data?

19. How desirable is it to be able to mark ropeless gear and trigger release mechanisms with a chartplotter as opposed to using a manufacturer's mobile application?

4.0 Gear Viewing

Context

Ocean users (e.g., mobile fishing vessels, other fixed-gear vessels, vessels transiting nearby) must be able to detect ropeless fishing gear. This is a fundamental element of functional equivalence to physical surface markers (discussed in Section I. Introduction). Currently, in the Greater Atlantic Region, other ocean users can access location information from every ropeless system, regardless of manufacturer, on a unified platform that alleviates the potential need to monitor multiple applications or devices. This is accomplished through a data aggregator that compiles the location information for ropeless gear (generated by individual fixed-gear fishing vessels and ropeless gear manufacturers) and disseminates the information to other user groups. NMFS has developed partnerships and prototype data aggregation systems with independent organizations to facilitate the exchange of ropeless gear location information. For more discussion about data aggregators, see Section 9.0.

Option for Sharing Ropeless Gear Location Data

Decision-makers should establish rules regarding what information a data aggregator shares and with whom. For example, in an extreme case, a data aggregator could allow the precise location and identification information of digitally marked gear to be viewable to anyone and from shore. Alternatively, shoreside viewing could be restricted to displaying only areas of high gear density (without identifying information). As another option, viewing could be restricted to users within a specific physical distance from the gear comparable to visual sighting of traditional gear.

Determining how digital gear-marking data are shared requires balancing three key factors: Data transmission costs; the privacy of a vessel's location; and the

privacy of the fishing gear's location. It should also be noted that sending and receiving ropeless gear information to and from a data aggregator in near real-time would require access to the internet or cellular data. However, there may be specific circumstances where information is not needed in near-real time, such as in areas with low fishing effort.

There are at least four possible options for sharing gear location information with vessels at sea:

Option 1: Curated by a Data Aggregator

- *Process*: A vessel actively shares its current location with a data aggregator. The data aggregator transmits location data of ropeless gear within a pre-specified radius of the vessel.

- *Priorities/trade offs*: This prioritizes ropeless gear location privacy and lower data transmission costs, but it requires vessels to anonymously provide their physical location to the aggregator.

Option 2: GPS Filtered on Vessel

- *Process*: A data aggregator sends all ropeless gear location data to a vessel (or all locations within a certain range of where the vessel is taking its trip). The vessel's integrated GPS technology then filters the information locally, displaying only the gear within a specified radius.

- *Priorities/trade offs*: Compared to option 1, this would increase vessel location privacy, but could increase data transmission costs and may create data security vulnerabilities that could expose ropeless gear information beyond the specified radius if the GPS-filtering technology was hacked.

Option 3: Criteria-Based Access

- *Process*: This refines Options 1 or 2 by restricting the aggregator to only send data to vessels that meet specific criteria (e.g., vessels actively permitted to fish in certain areas or fisheries).

- *Priorities/trade offs*: This alleviates some data security concerns, but significantly increases management and administrative complexity.

Option 4: Fully Public

- *Process*: The data aggregator publicly shares all ropeless gear location data.

- *Priorities/trade offs*: This places the highest priority on vessel location privacy. However, it essentially eliminates on-demand gear location privacy and has a comparatively high data transmission cost.

Some of these options require a data aggregator to temporarily know the location of the vessels to which it is sharing gear location data. This is

similar to how you need to allow a mapping/navigational app to know your location while traveling for it to provide directions, traffic, or road conditions in real-time. A data governance plan (discussed in Section 9) could specify how long a data aggregator may retain vessel location data.

While NMFS has implemented location data collection programs, such as vessel monitoring systems, and states have implemented electronic tracking of Federal lobster vessels, these programs were created for specific purposes and mandate specifically what information must be shared when and with whom. Moreover, these programs do not include all vessels that operate near fixed gear. Thus, these programs, and similar state programs, are not sufficient as a comprehensive solution if vessel location needs to be shared with a data aggregator for the purposes of disseminating ropeless gear location information.

Questions

20. Which of the four data-sharing options (or combination thereof) is preferable, and why? How should data transmission costs, privacy of a vessel's location, and privacy of the fishing gear's location be prioritized against each other?

21. Under what circumstances is it necessary or desirable that ropeless fishing gear markings be viewable and updated in near real-time? Under what circumstances is it unnecessary?

22. At what specific distance from deployed ropeless gear should its location become visible on a vessel's display? Should this distance vary for specific fisheries, users, or circumstances?

23. Should digitally marked gear be viewable from shore? If so, which specific user groups (e.g., law enforcement, researchers, the general public) should have shoreside access? Would you support shoreside viewability if it only provided aggregated and anonymized information (e.g., a heat map)?

24. Should there be a tiered-distance threshold where *only* the gear's location is viewable from a certain distance away, but detailed identifying information (e.g., permit or ownership details, as appropriate) becomes visible only when the vessel is in very-close proximity?

25. Should vessel location data be shared with a data aggregator so it may curate and provide only the gear data within a specific radius (Option 1; akin to sharing your location with a mapping application for driving directions)? If

not, what are your concerns regarding this option?

5.0 Gear Conflict

Context

Gear conflict avoidance relies on vessel operators adequately marking their gear, maintaining a vigilant watch, and taking necessary steps to avoid marked gear. Generally, all fishermen have equal access to fish in Federal waters in the manner specified by law. Fishermen are prohibited from causing a gear conflict by negligently and without authorization removing, damaging, or tampering with another person's fishing gear. These obligations and requirements apply whether the fisherman is utilizing traditional or ropeless fishing gear and whether they operate with fixed or mobile gear.

Many stakeholders express concern that eliminating or reducing the number of physical surface markers with ropeless gear will increase the incidence of gear conflict. Conversely, others suggest that digitally marked gear may actually reduce conflicts due to the distinct advantages of digital marks. Environmental factors—such as nighttime operations, fog, and heavy seas—severely limit the visibility of traditional surface markers. Digital marking provides reliable, long-range viewability of fixed gear under both normal and adverse conditions that may be superior to visual sightings of surface markers.

Furthermore, because ropeless gear could be less susceptible to displacement by heavy weather, and some systems can be acoustically detected even if displaced, its adoption could result in less “ghost” gear, further reducing the potential for conflict. Additionally, removing physical buoy lines from the water column allows vessels to safely transit directly over fixed gear without causing a conflict.

Stakeholders have also pointed out that digital marks could significantly assist in the enforcement and resolution of gear conflict incidents. If law enforcement agencies are authorized to access digital gear-marking data, combining near real-time ropeless gear locations with existing vessel tracking systems (such as vessel monitoring systems or automatic identification systems) could provide useful data to support investigations into gear conflicts.

In 1996, at the recommendation of the New England Council in coordination with the Mid-Atlantic Council and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, NMFS implemented a process for resolving gear conflicts in

fixed and mobile gear fishery management plans through a framework adjustment. NMFS or the Councils could initiate a new framework adjustment that specifically considers and delineates the operational obligations and responsibilities for fishing with, and around, ropeless fishing gear in Federal waters.

Questions

26. What are the gear conflict-related benefits and concerns of ropeless fishing? How are those benefits or concerns different for one-end ropeless?

27. Are specific steps or regulatory measures necessary to proactively decrease gear conflicts related to ropeless fishing? If so, what are they?

28. Is it necessary for fishing vessels operating around ropeless gear to view digital gear markings in near real-time? Does this depend on the fishery or location?

29. Should fishing vessels operating near ropeless gear be required by regulation to carry the technology necessary (e.g., internet and a visualization tool, such as a chartplotter) to view digital gear markings in near real-time? Or, are the consequences of causing a gear conflict enough deterrence that such regulatory requirements are not necessary?

30. Should fishermen be required to report gear conflicts?

31. Does the digitization of fishing gear locations improve situational awareness of gear locations at sea?

6.0 Equity

Context

Currently, the Greater Atlantic Region fixed-gear fishery regulations require various physical surface markers, prohibiting the use of ropeless gear. Research and testing of ropeless fishing gear is being conducted through exempted fishing permits (EFP), which allow approved vessels to engage in otherwise prohibited activities. While some view EFPs as a viable pathway for permitting ropeless fishing to advance our knowledge and experience, others argue they are inequitable because they grant fishing privileges to a limited number of select permit holders. NMFS, in general, supports permanently relieving the restrictions on gear-marking requirements, in part, to minimize the burden on the industry to apply for and report on EFPs, as well as to minimize governmental resource burdens. Furthermore, long-term reliance on EFPs to authorize ropeless fishing could lead to unequal access and opportunities among fishermen.

Some forms of ropeless fishing—such as on-demand gear—require different

technology compared to traditional fixed-gear fishing. For fishermen who choose to adopt ropeless gear, their operational methods could change in ways that some allege would potentially alter the character of the fishery. Some have voiced concerns that the technological and financial requirements of on-demand gear could shift the balance of competitive success, which could ultimately lead to the consolidation of some fixed-gear fisheries. Others note that industries regularly adapt to emerging technologies while maintaining the character of the industry.

Questions

32. What specific equity concerns do you have regarding the authorization and use of ropeless fishing gear?

33. What measures could NMFS implement to address equity concerns?

34. How does the current reliance on EFPs impact the development, fairness, and opportunity within the fishery?

35. How can ropeless fishing programs be designed and managed to ensure fair access and equitable outcomes for all willing participants and affected parties?

7.0 Potential Training Requirements To Use Ropeless Fishing Gear

Context

As with any technology, it is assumed that experience with a new gear will foster proficiency with its use. To establish a baseline of proficiency, a knowledge demonstration or training requirement could be required before fishermen are authorized to use ropeless systems. This requirement could be structured in various ways, ranging from an on-the-water practical test to simply reviewing educational materials (such as “how-to” videos for a manufacturer's mobile application) followed by a brief knowledge assessment. If a training requirement is deemed necessary, decisions on which entities should develop and provide this training, and exactly how fishermen should be expected to demonstrate their competency with ropeless systems, will need to be made.

Questions

36. Should ropeless users be required to demonstrate that they know how to properly deploy, retrieve, and/or mark ropeless fishing gear before being authorized to use it?

37. If a knowledge demonstration or training requirement is implemented, what specific elements or milestones should be required of the operator? Who should be responsible for developing

and administering this training (*e.g.*, NMFS, gear manufacturers, other)?

38. Should other ocean users (*e.g.*, mobile gear fishermen) be required to demonstrate proficiency in using the visualization technology necessary to detect digitally marked gear?

39. How should NMFS handle repeated instances of operator error? How would NMFS distinguish between an operator error and an equipment malfunction?

8.0 Law Enforcement

Context

Ropeless systems present both challenges and practical utility for law enforcement. For example, on-demand gear manufacturers currently use proprietary acoustic communication protocols, requiring law enforcement vessels to carry multiple, manufacturer-specific deck boxes and transducers to retrieve and inspect different ropeless gear systems. While efforts are underway to develop and test a universal deck box capable of communicating with all on-demand gear, this remains a technological hurdle. If manufacturers adopted a common acoustic-signaling standard, a universal deck box would be unnecessary; however, there is currently no industry-wide initiative or regulatory requirement to pursue a standardized acoustic protocol. The MITRE Corporation's technical report *Evaluation of On-Demand Gear Acoustic Interoperability Approaches in the Northeast U.S.* (see **ADDRESSES**) examines whether a common acoustic signaling approach is needed.

In addition to the challenge of triggering on-demand devices, enforcement personnel must be trained to safely operate various proprietary release mechanisms to retrieve and properly redeploy gear during at-sea inspections. Furthermore, it may be impractical for law enforcement to inspect timed-retrieval devices. Safety and logistical concerns also exist for grappling ropeless gear. Covert inspections may also be logistically challenging.

Despite these physical challenges, digitally marked gear offers practical utility for enforcement operations. If law enforcement personnel are authorized to access digital gear location data from shore, or from an expanded radius at-sea, it could streamline patrol trip planning and help agencies allocate their on-water resources more efficiently. Likewise, digital markers and associated data records could provide law enforcement with useful information to support investigations—

information that is simply not available with traditional fixed gear.

Questions

40. What concerns or suggestions do you have regarding enforcing ropeless fishing?

41. How should law enforcement address the inspection of ropeless gear that is rigged with timed-retrieval devices or that is grapple-only?

9.0 Data Governance and Management Context

Data Standard

For digital gear markings to successfully reproduce the functions of physical surface markers, a robust data-governance framework must be developed to ensure that essential information flows efficiently among data users. NMFS is currently working to identify the specific information that should be aggregated from ropeless fishing systems and disseminated to end users. Standardizing the data associated with digitally marked gear (as is done for other U.S. fisheries programs) can support software development, efficiency in information management and dissemination, and generally increase the quality and accuracy of data. A potential list of data elements and user groups is provided in a Northeast Fisheries Science Center report (Galvez, 2026, see **ADDRESSES**).

Data Aggregator(s)

As described in Section 5.0, an entity must act as a data aggregator that collects and disseminates the location information of ropeless fishing gear. Currently, two organizations act as data aggregators in the Greater Atlantic Region. NMFS has conducted an initial evaluation regarding the role of the Federal government in providing these data services, as well as the additional legal requirements that would apply. Federal management of ropeless gear location information would likely require complex procedures to comply with multiple Federal statutes. Given that certain Federal statutory requirements would not necessarily apply to private or independent entities, a non-Federal third party could aggregate this data more efficiently than NMFS, potentially providing more effective data services for ocean users.

Currently, data from each on-demand system is transmitted to the manufacturer's database, transmitted to one data aggregator, shared with the other data aggregator, and finally distributed back out to visualization platforms. Having a single data aggregator and fewer points of

transmission would reduce errors and latency and increase reliability and efficiency. It would be helpful to determine if multiple organizations should be allowed to coordinate with each other and each act as a data aggregator or if only one organization should act as a data aggregator. In addition, NMFS is seeking stakeholder input on what requirements there should be for digitally marked gear databases to protect fishermen's proprietary data.

Questions

42. How should data for ropeless fishing be governed and managed?

43. Do you have any additional feedback or recommendations regarding the list of data elements in the report *A Proposal for Functional Data Specifications of On-Demand Fishing Gear* (Galvez, 2026, see **ADDRESSES**)? Are there any missing data elements, or elements that should be modified or removed?

44. What specific security and operational requirements should be considered for independent third parties managing digitally marked gear locations and other associated data?

10.0 Additional Considerations

Questions

45. Is there any other information that you would like to share in response to this request for information or regarding ropeless fishing more generally?

46. NMFS has heard concerns regarding the cost of systems. For fishermen who choose to fish with ropeless fishing gear, there could be several ways to reduce the cost of acquiring ropeless systems, such as by leasing gear from gear libraries or utilizing grant or loan programs. How should NMFS balance the potential regulatory requirements for technologically complex features (*e.g.*, automated acoustic marking, real-time data transmission, *etc.*) against the potential cost of these features?

47. Beyond the direct cost of purchasing ropeless gear, what are the other economic costs of ropeless fishing? What are the economic benefits?

48. Should NMFS require a common acoustic protocol or signaling standard for all approved on-demand systems to ensure interoperability across the industry, or should manufacturers be permitted to maintain proprietary acoustic approaches? This topic is discussed in the MITRE technical report *Evaluation of On-Demand Gear Acoustic Interoperability Approaches in the Northeast U.S.* (see **ADDRESSES**).

49. If NMFS allows the use of ropeless fishing gear, should the option to use it be phased in (e.g., by specific geographic regions, by fishery, or through pilot programs)?

50. How can NMFS design ropeless fishing regulations to be flexible enough to accommodate future technological advancements?

51. What are the potential environmental benefits or consequences of fishing with ropeless gear? What are the potential benefits or consequences of ropeless fishing on fisheries operations?

52. Ropeless fishing gear is currently being used in fisheries outside of the Greater Atlantic Region. Do you have examples of its use or management outside the Greater Atlantic Region that should be emulated or avoided within the Greater Atlantic Region?

III. Definitions

Grappling: Method of retrieving fishing gear from the ocean floor by dragging a weighted hook along the bottom to snag rope (such as a groundline or bridle) that is connected to traps, pots, or nets.

Interoperability: Capability of different technologies, systems, devices, models, or brands to communicate, share information, and function with each other.

Retrieval mechanism: Apparatus designed to surface a retrieval line to allow for the hauling of fixed gear. For example, a buoyant spool, inflatable lift bag, and pop-up buoy.

On-demand device: Equipment that uses acoustic release technology to trigger a retrieval mechanism.

On-demand fishing gear: Fixed gear equipped with at least one on-demand device.

On-demand system: Combination of technologies and devices, including an on-demand device, that allow for the deployment, retrieval, and marking of fixed gear positions without persistent buoy lines. This definition excludes the technology needed to share and display digital gear marks. An on-demand system is a type of ropeless system.

One-end ropeless: String or trawl of fixed gear that uses a traditional, persistent buoy line on only one end. The end without the persistent buoy line may or may not be rigged with an on-demand or timed-retrieval device and retrieval mechanism.

Ropeless fishing gear: Fixed fishing gear that operates without persistent buoy lines. This definition includes fixed gear rigged with an on-demand device or timed-retrieval device that triggers a retrieval mechanism, as well

as fixed gear that can only be retrieved by grappling.

Ropeless system: Combination of technologies and devices that allow for the deployment, retrieval, and marking of fixed gear positions without persistent buoy lines. This definition excludes the technology needed to share and display digital gear marks. This definition includes, but is not limited to, on-demand systems and timed-retrieval systems.

Timed-retrieval device: Equipment that uses a pre-set timer or a degradable galvanic link to trigger a retrieval mechanism.

Timed-retrieval fishing gear: Fixed gear equipped with at least one timed-retrieval device.

Timed-retrieval system: Combination of technologies and devices, including a timed-retrieval device, that allow for the deployment, retrieval, and marking of fixed gear positions without persistent buoy lines. This definition excludes the technology needed to share and display digital gear marks. A timed-retrieval system is a type of ropeless system.

Persistent buoy line: Traditional fixed gear endline or vertical line that extends from the fishing gear on the seafloor to the physical surface marker for the entirety of the soak time.

IV. Other

Please note that this is an RFI only. In accordance with the implementing regulations of the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (PRA), specifically 5 CFR 1320.3(h)(4), this general solicitation is exempt from the PRA. Facts or opinions submitted in response to general solicitations of comments from the public, published in the **Federal Register** or other publications, regardless of the form or format thereof, provided that no person is required to supply specific information pertaining to the commenter, other than that necessary for self-identification, as a condition of the agency's full consideration, are not generally considered information collections and therefore not subject to the PRA.

This RFI is issued solely for information and planning purposes; it does not constitute a request for proposals, applications, proposal abstracts, or quotations. This RFI does not commit the U.S. Government to contract for any supplies or services or make a grant award. Further, NMFS is not seeking proposals through this RFI and will not accept unsolicited proposals. Choosing not to respond to this RFI does not preclude participation in any future procurement, if conducted.

(Authority: 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*; 16 U.S.C. 5101 *et seq.*; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, Division JJ, Title I, Section 101 *et seq.*)

Dated: July 13, 2026.

Shannon Bettridge,
Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

[FR Doc. 2026-14363 Filed 7-15-26; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3510-22-P

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648-XF865]

Gulf Fishery Management Council; Public Meeting

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice of a public meeting.

SUMMARY: The Gulf Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) will hold a 2 day in-person meeting of its Standing and Shrimp Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSC).

DATES: The meeting will be held in-person on Tuesday, July 21 and Wednesday, July 22, 2026, from 9 a.m.–5 p.m., EDT daily.

ADDRESSES: The meeting will take place at the Gulf Council's office located at 4107 W. Spruce Street, Suite 200, Tampa, FL 33607. Hybrid connection information will be available on the Council's website at <https://www.gulfcouncil.org> and clicking on the "meeting tab".

Council address: Gulf Fishery Management Council, 4107 W. Spruce Street, Suite 200, Tampa, FL 33607; telephone: (813) 348-1630.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Mr. Ryan Rindone, Lead Fishery Biologist, Gulf Fishery Management Council; ryan.rindone@gulfcouncil.org, telephone: (813) 348-1630.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Tuesday, July 21, 2026; 9 a.m.–5 p.m. EDT

The meeting will begin with introductions and adoption of agenda, review and approval of Meeting Minutes and Summary from the May 2026 SSC webinar meeting, and Scope of Work.

The SSCs will review and discuss Estimation of Shrimp Trawl Bycatch Methodology and Gray Triggerfish Bycatch Estimation, including presentations, background materials and SSC Discussion.