



## Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council

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Michael P. Luisi, Chairman | P. Weston Townsend, Vice Chairman

Christopher M. Moore, Ph.D., Executive Director

# MEMORANDUM

**Date:** January 26, 2023  
**To:** Chris Moore  
**From:** Jason Didden  
**Subject:** Monkfish: FW 13 2023-2025 Specifications; Research Set Aside (RSA)

The Council will consider final action for Monkfish Framework (FW) 13 and consider endorsing revised monkfish RSA priorities. Dr. Rachel Feeny of New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) staff will present. The following primary documents support Council action (other supporting documents are linked at the bottom of the next page):

-NEFMC Press Release on Monkfish Specifications Final Action and RSA priorities

-Updated FW 13 Decision Document

-1/20/23 NEFMC Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) Summary (ABC Remand)

As referenced in the updated decision document as “December 2022 Request of Councils,” the NEFMC SSC revised their 2023-2025 monkfish Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) recommendations. The revised ABCs are similar to recent catches, and the measures adopted by the NEFMC should approximately maintain current regulatory constraints on the fishery. Staff continues to note that monkfish catches in each area have varied from about 4,000-8,000 metric tons annually over the last decade - this variability, and small management uncertainty buffers, create the potential for annual catch limit (ACL) overages in either or both areas. Per current regulations, ACL overages are “paid back” by reducing future specifications.

The motions (draft) passed by the NEFMC (all unanimous and aligned with motions from a January 23, 2023 joint Monkfish Committee/Advisory Panel meeting) are:

### Framework Adjustment 13

1. Ms. Etrie moved on behalf of the Committee: that for Action 1 (Specifications), the Council recommends Alternative 3 (January 2023 Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommendation) as the preferred alternative for both areas.

2. Ms. Etrie moved on behalf of the Committee: that for Action 2, Alternative 2, the Council accepts the Plan Development Team (PDT) recommendation for a DAS use cap of 46 across both areas.

3. Ms. Etrie moved on behalf of the Committee: that for Action 2, the Council recommends adding an option to Alternative 2 for 37 Days-at-Sea (DAS) for the Southern Area and selecting it as the preferred alternative.
4. Ms. Etrie moved on behalf of the Committee: that for Action 2, the Council recommends Alternative 2, Option A (35 DAS) in the Northern Area and selecting it as the preferred alternative.
5. Ms. Etrie moved and Mr. Olszewski seconded: that the Council approves Monkfish Framework Adjustment 13 for submission to NOAA Fisheries.
6. Ms. Etrie moved on behalf of the Committee: that the Council asks the NEFSC that prior to the next monkfish management track assessment, the current Ismooth assumptions be investigated and to be sure that the survey is tracking more than survey noise and that recent catches and survey trends are linked. Also, a detailed research plan is needed as soon as possible to increase the likelihood of the next research track assessment being successful.

#### Monkfish Research Set-Aside (RSA) Priorities

7. Ms. Etrie moved on behalf of the Committee: that the Council's revised list of Monkfish RSA Priorities for 2023-2024 is:

##### Highest Priority

1. Development of alternative stock assessment models, and analyze existing survey indices (e.g., dredge survey) for potential use in the Ismooth model and/or alternative assessment;
2. Develop a standardized CPUE index for the commercial directed monkfish gillnet fishery for potential use in the assessment;

##### Other Priorities (not in priority order):

3. Research on monkfish life history focusing on: (a) age and growth, (b) longevity, (c) reproduction and (d) natural mortality;
4. Trawl and gillnet gear studies focusing on (a) bycatch reduction, including reducing interactions, and injury/mortality associated with these interactions, with sea turtles, Atlantic sturgeon, right and humpback whales, and other protected species and (b) size and/or species selectivity;
5. Research on the pingers used for monkfish gillnet gear to reduce porpoise interactions, so that interaction with seals is reduced;
6. Research to improve the monkfish market (e.g., increasing domestic demand, making new markets); and
7. Research on discard mortality rates for gillnet and trawl gear (scallop dredge discard mortality rate was adjusted down in the 2022 assessment based on research. Need research for other gears).

Other supporting background materials available online via hyperlinks include:

[-Updated FW13 draft EA](#)

[-Monkfish Advisory Panel and Committee – January 23, 2023 Meeting \(draft motions\)](#)

[-PDT memo to Committee re RSA program priorities](#)

[-Link to 1/20/23 NEFMC SSC meeting materials](#) (remand meeting)

[-Link to December MAFMC meeting](#)



# New England Fishery Management Council

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
January 26, 2023

PRESS CONTACT: Janice Plante  
(607) 592-4817, [jplante@nefmc.org](mailto:jplante@nefmc.org)

## Monkfish: Council Takes Final Action on Fishing Year 2023-2025 Specifications/Measures; Revises Research Set-Aside Priorities

The New England Fishery Management Council voted on a package of measures during its [January 2023 meeting](#) that set the stage for how the monkfish fishery will operate during the 2023-2025 fishing years.

The measures were developed through Framework Adjustment 13 to the Monkfish Fishery Management Plan and include the following:

- Acceptable biological catches (ABCs) and other specifications for both the Northern and Southern Monkfish Fishery Management Areas (see map on page 2);
- Days-at-sea allocations and a days-at-sea usage cap for both the northern and southern areas; and
- A 12" minimum mesh size requirement for monkfish gillnets with implementation delayed until 2026.

The monkfish fishery is managed jointly between the New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Councils. The New England Council has the administrative lead, but joint management means both Councils must vote on new measures before an action can be submitted to NOAA Fisheries for review, approval, and implementation. The Mid-Atlantic Council will discuss and vote on Framework 13 on [February 7, 2023](#).

The New England Council also revised its 2023-2024 priorities for the Monkfish Research Set-Aside (RSA) Program during the January meeting in Portsmouth, NH.

### How We Got Here

The New England Council was scheduled to take final action on Framework 13 during its [December 2022](#) meeting. However, the Council voiced concern during that meeting about the method used during the last three assessments to determine stock status.

The method, known as Ismooth, applies a federal trawl survey multiplier to the latest three-year average catch from the fishery



*Monkfish captured during a Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) research trip in Closed Area II on Georges Bank in October 2022. – VIMS photo*



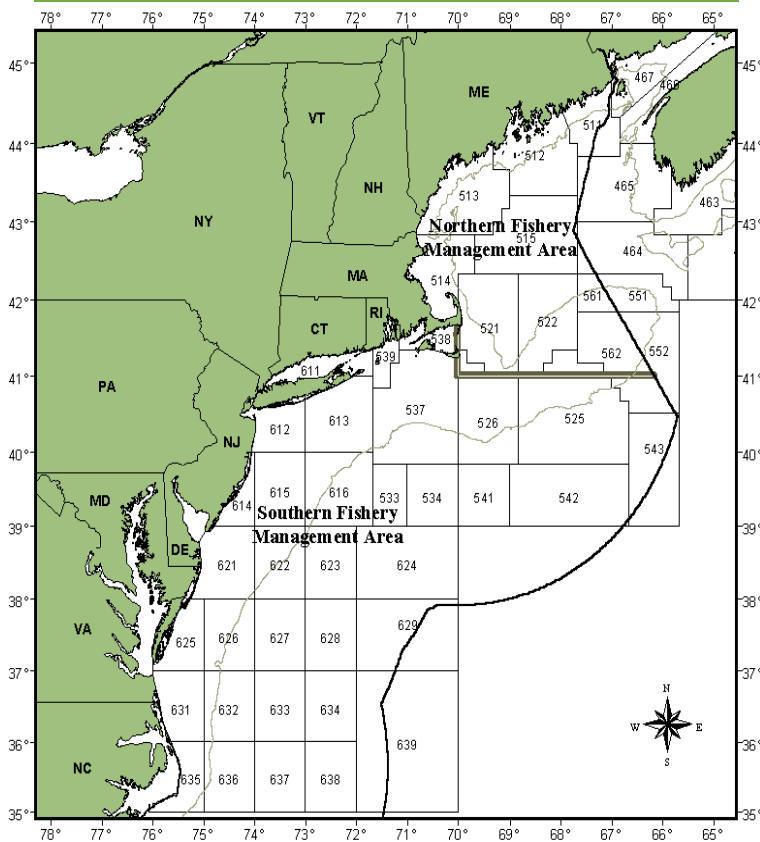
# New England Fishery Management Council

to develop new catch advice. The Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) used this peer reviewed method during an [October 2022 meeting](#) to develop acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendations for fishing years 2023-2025 for monkfish.

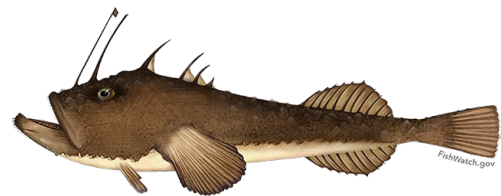
The Council uses the SSC’s ABC recommendations as the starting point for setting total allowable landings for this fishery. Consistent with the assessment results, the SSC’s October ABC recommendations would have led to a potential reduction in landings of 11% in the north and 27% in the south relative to fishing year 2021 landings.

Council members raised concerns about the Ismooth approach, noting that: (1) the trawl survey may not be catching monkfish consistently; and (2) monkfish landings have been low recently due to the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of markets, high trip costs, low fish prices, and other factors.

## Northern and Southern Monkfish Fishery Management Areas



*The Northern and Southern Monkfish Fishery Management Areas are managed separately. Each area has its own total allowable landings.*



The Council voted in December to remand the ABC recommendations to the SSC for reconsideration “to facilitate a transition to the appropriate application of Ismooth for monkfish stocks.” Instead of using the trawl survey multipliers applied to the recent 3-year catch, the Council asked the SSC to also consider the average of that approach with applying the trawl survey multiplier to the fishing year 2020-2022 ABCs, which is closer to how current ABCs were set.

The SSC met [January 20, 2023](#) to consider the Council’s request and decided to [update its recommendation](#) to accept the ABCs the Council requested. This resulted in 2023-2025 ABCs as follows for each of the three fishing years:

- Northern Area: 6,224 metric tons
- Southern Area: 5,861 metric tons

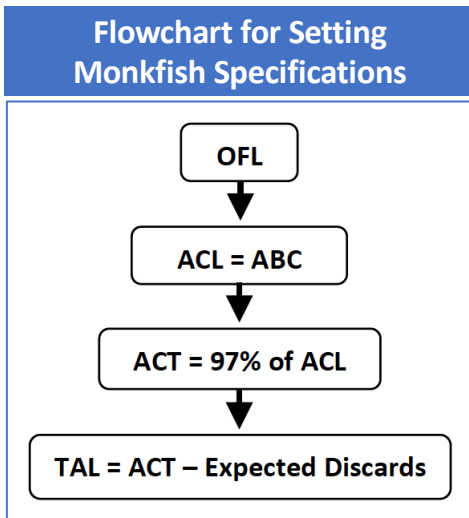
Next, the Council: (1) approved the revised ABCs at its [January 24-26, 2023 meeting](#); (2) selected its preferred alternatives for



# New England Fishery Management Council

days-at-sea effort controls (see next page); and (3) voted to submit the framework to NOAA Fisheries following action by the Mid-Atlantic on the same measures.

The formula for setting specifications and TALs by area are shown in the flowchart and table below.



**Fishery Impact:** If approved by NOAA Fisheries, the proposed fishing year 2023-2025 total allowable landings represent the following changes from fishing year 2021 landings:

- **Northern Monkfish Fishery Management Area:** a potential 2% increase over 2021 landings, which totaled 5,215 metric tons;
- **Southern Monkfish Fishery Management Area:** a potential 76% increase over 2021 landings, which totaled 1,968 metric tons.

The New England Council selected the SSC’s revised recommendations because, among other reasons, the ABCs and subsequent TALs resulted in the least economic harm to the fishing industry during a transition to using the intended application of Ismooth in the management process.

## Proposed Fishing Year 2023-2025 Monkfish Specifications

Monkfish Specifications	Northern Fishery Management Area	Southern Fishery Management Area
Overfishing Limit (OFL)	Undetermined	Undetermined
Acceptable Biological Catch = Annual Catch Limit (ABC = ACL)	6,224 metric tons	5,861 metric tons
Management Uncertainty (deduct 3% of ACL)	187 metric tons	176 metric tons
Annual Catch Target (ACT) = 97% of ACL	6,038 metric tons	5,685 metric tons
Expected Discards (10-year median)	729 metric tons	2,205 metric tons
Federal Total Allowable Landings (TAL) = ACT minus discards	5,309 metric tons	3,481 metric tons

### Assessment Info

During its December 2022 meeting, the Council received a [presentation](#) on the new peer reviewed stock assessment for monkfish.

The stock’s status continued to be “unknown” as a result of this assessment.

- The Draft Monkfish Management Track Assessment Report is [posted here](#).
- The peer review panel’s report is included in [this document](#).

~ The next Monkfish Management Track Stock Assessment is scheduled for 2025. ~



# New England Fishery Management Council

**Days-at-Sea Effort Controls:** Through Framework Adjustment 13, the Council is recommending separate days-at-sea allocations for the northern and southern areas. Currently, limited access monkfish permit holders are allocated 46 days-at-sea, which are reduced to 45.2 days to support the Monkfish Research Set-Aside (RSA) Program. For the next three fishing years, the Council voted to make days-at-sea allocations distinct for each area as follows:

- **Northern Area** – 35 days; and
- **Southern Area** – 37 days.

While the total adds up to 72, the Council voted to cap the number of days-at-sea that could be fished by each permit holder at 46, which would prevent overall effort from increasing.

**Gillnet Mesh Size:** In December, both the New England and Mid-Atlantic Councils approved a 12" minimum mesh size for monkfish gillnets. The provision will be included in Framework 13 with implementation delayed until the 2026 fishing year.

**RSA Priorities:** Aside from Framework 13, the Council revised its 2023-2024 monkfish research priorities in anticipation of a [2023 RSA funding opportunity](#). NOAA Fisheries selects RSA projects that [match the Council's research priorities](#).



## Revised 2023-2024 Priorities for the Monkfish Research Set-Aside Program

### Highest Priorities

1. Develop alternative stock assessment models; analyze existing survey indices for potential use in the Ismooth model and/or alternative assessment models.
2. Develop a standardized Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) index for the commercial directed monkfish gillnet fishery for potential use in assessments.

### Other Priorities (not ranked)

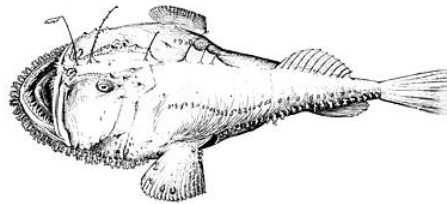
3. Research on monkfish life history focusing on: (a) age and growth; (b) longevity; (c) reproduction; and (d) natural mortality.
4. Trawl and gillnet gear studies focusing on: (a) bycatch reduction, including reducing interactions with and injury/mortality to sea turtles, Atlantic sturgeon, North Atlantic right whales, humpback whales, and other protected species; and (b) size and/or species selectivity.
5. Research on pingers currently used to reduce harbor porpoise interactions with monkfish gillnet gear; investigate effectiveness of pinger use to also reduce seal interactions with monkfish gillnets.
6. Research to improve the monkfish market, including increasing domestic demand and developing new markets.
7. Research on discard mortality rates for gillnet and trawl gear (scallop dredge research was conducted previously).

- **Questions about Framework 13?** Contact Monkfish Plan Coordinator Dr. Rachel Feeney at [rfeeney@nefmc.org](mailto:rfeeney@nefmc.org).
- **Questions about monkfish RSA priorities?** Contact Jenny Couture at [jcouture@nefmc.org](mailto:jcouture@nefmc.org).

# **DECISION DOCUMENT**

## **Monkfish Fishery Management Plan**

### **Framework Adjustment 13**



This document was developed to help the MAFMC select preferred alternatives for Framework Adjustment 13.

*January 27, 2023*

*Version – MAFMC*

Anticipated Council Action:

Prior to selecting final preferred alternatives, New England Fishery Management Council staff will present the measures under consideration in Framework Adjustment 13 and their draft analyzed impacts on target species, non-target species, protected resources, physical environment (EFH), and human communities (economic and social impacts). Staff will also answer questions, as needed, about the document.

1. Select *preferred alternatives* for Actions 1 and 2 in Framework Adjustment 13 (Action 3 was selected in December 2022)
  - a. Action 1: Fishing Year (FY) 2023-2025 specifications
  - b. Action 2: Effort controls (Days-at-Sea)
  - c. Action 3: Monkfish gillnet mesh size
2. Motion to submit Framework Adjustment 13 to NOAA Fisheries.

*Note:* Monkfish is managed under a joint management plan with the NEFMC and MAFMC, the NEFMC having the administrative lead. The NEFMC selected preferred alternatives for Actions 1 and 2 during its meeting January 24-26, 2023.

Per the monkfish fishery [regulations](#):

“Management adjustments made to the Monkfish FMP require majority approval of each Council for submission to the Secretary”

“If either the NEFMC or MAFMC has rejected all options, then the Regional Administrator may select any measure that has not been rejected by both Councils and that meets the Monkfish FMP's goals and objectives.”

“If the Councils fail to submit a recommendation to the Regional Administrator by February 1 that meets the goals and objectives of the Monkfish FMP, the Regional Administrator may implement through rulemaking in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act one of the options reviewed and not rejected by either Council, provided the option meets the goals and objectives of the Monkfish FMP, and is consistent with other applicable law.”



Action 1 – FY 2023-2025 Specifications

Section 4.1 – Action 1 – FY 2023-2025 Specifications <i>Choose one alternative</i>		Preferred by		
		AP	Committee	NEFMC
<b>Alternative 1</b> (Sec. 4.1.1)	<b>No Action</b> OFL = 0 mt; ACL = 0 mt; TALs = 0 mt			
<b>Alternative 2</b> (Sec. 4.1.2)	<b>October 2022 SSC Recommendation</b> North: OFL = undetermined; ACL = 5,526 mt; TAL = 4,632 mt South: OFL = undetermined; ACL = 3,766 mt; TAL = 1,449 mt Discard deduction = 10-year median discards			
<b>Alternative 3</b> (Sec. 4.1.3)	<b>December 2022 Request of Councils*</b> North: OFL = undetermined; ACL = 6,226 mt; TAL = 5,309 mt South: OFL = undetermined; ACL = 5,861 mt; TAL = 3,481 mt Discard deduction = 10-year median discards	X	X	X
<b>Decisions/Questions/Information to Consider</b>				
<p>* The SSC adopted this as its recommendation on January 20, 2023. The ABC cannot exceed the level that the SSC recommends.</p> <p>The PDT memo to the SSC regarding this request is provided under Tab 8.</p> <p>The SSC memo to the NEFMC on recommendations for specifications is provided under Tab 12.</p> <p>There are no default specifications for the monkfish fishery. Without specifications, the fishing year starts on May 1 with an ABC and Annual Catch Limit of 0 mt. The accountability measure would still be in place: a pound-for-pound deduction from the Annual Catch Target in the second year following the year that catch (landings and discards) exceeds the ACL. Alternatives 2 and 3 would create default specifications for the fishery.</p>				
<b>Other important Considerations/Draft EA References</b>				
<p>Document #2a is the draft environmental assessment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Target species impacts: Section 6.2.1 (p. 85)</li> <li>• Non-target species impacts: Section 6.3.1 (p. 88)</li> <li>• Protected resource impacts: Section 6.4.1 (p. 90)</li> <li>• Impacts on physical environment and Essential Fish Habitat: Section 6.5.1 (p. 95)</li> <li>• Human community impacts: Section 6.5.1 (p. 98)</li> </ul>				

## Action 2 – Effort Controls

<b>Section 4.2 – Action 2 – Effort Controls</b>		<b>Preferred by</b>		
<i>If Alternative 2 is selected, choose one option for North and one option for South.</i>		<b>AP</b>	<b>Committee</b>	<b>NEFMC</b>
<b>Alternative 1</b> (Sec. 4.2.1)	<b>No Action</b> 46 (45.2 after RSA deduction) monkfish DAS allocated for each limited access monkfish permit, 37 of which may be used in the South			
<b>Alternative 2</b> (Sec. 4.2.2)	<b>Adjust Monkfish DAS Allocation</b> Limited access monkfish permits receive separate DAS allocations for north and south. Use capped at 46 DAS if total exceeds 46.  North DAS options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Option A = 35 DAS</li> <li>• Option B = 30 DAS</li> <li>• Option C = 20 DAS</li> <li>• Option D = 10 DAS</li> </ul> South DAS options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Option A = 35 DAS</li> <li>• Option B = 30 DAS</li> <li>• Option C = 20 DAS</li> <li>• Option D = 10 DAS</li> </ul>	X Option A for North and South.	X Option A for North. Add Option for 37 DAS in South. Support 46 DAS cap.	X Option A for North. Add Option for 37 DAS in South. Support 46 DAS cap.
<b>Decisions/Questions/Information to Consider</b>				
Document #2a is the draft environmental assessment. Section 6.1.1 includes analyses for how these effort control options would have reduced recent fishery landings and compares these reductions to the landings reduction that would be necessary to keep landings within the FY 2023-2025 TALs proposed under Action 1, Alternatives 2 and 3.				
<b>Other important Considerations/Draft EA References</b>				
Document #2a is the draft environmental assessment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Target species impacts: Section 6.2.2 (p. 86)</li> <li>• Nontarget species impacts: Section 6.3.2 (p. 89)</li> <li>• Protected resource impacts: Section 6.4.2 (p. 93)</li> <li>• Impacts on physical environment and Essential Fish Habitat: Section 6.5.2 (p. 96)</li> <li>• Human community impacts: Section 6.6.2 (p. 101)</li> </ul>				

**Table 1 – Summary of potential impacts of the alternatives under consideration in Framework 13 across the valued ecosystem components.**

Alternatives		Direct and Indirect Impacts				
		Target Species	Non-target Species	Protected Resources	Physical Env. (EFH)	Human Communities
<b>Action 1: ABC, ACL, TAL</b>						
<b>Alt. 1: No Action</b>		Uncertain or moderate +	Positive	Slight + to moderate +	Slight +	Economic: High - Social: High -
<b>Alt. 2: Oct 2022 SSC Rec</b>		Uncertain or moderate +	Moderate +	Slight – to moderate +	Slight -	Economic: Negative Social: Moderate -
<b>Alt. 3: Dec 2022 Request</b>		Uncertain or slight +	Moderate +	Slight – to moderate +	Slight -	Economic: Positive Social: Slight -
<b>Action 2: Effort Controls</b>						
<b>Alt. 1: No Action</b>		Negligible to slight -	Negligible	Slight – to slight +	Slight -	Economic: Negligible Social: Slight -
<b>Alt. 2: Adjust Monkfish DAS Allocation</b>	<b>Option 2A: 35 DAS</b>	Slight -	Negligible	Slight -	Slight -	Economic: Negative Social: Slight -
	<b>Option 2B: 30 DAS</b>	Slight -	Negligible	Slight –	Slight -	Economic: Negative Social: Slight -
	<b>Option 2C: 20 DAS</b>	Moderate +	Moderate +	Moderate +	Slight -	Economic: Negative Social: Slight -
	<b>Option 2D: 10 DAS</b>	Moderate +	Moderate +	Moderate +	Slight -	Economic: Negative Social: Slight -
<b>Action 3: Monkfish Gillnet Mesh Size</b>						
<b>Alt. 1: No Action</b>		Slight -	Slight -	Slight – to slight +	No impact	Economic: Negligible Social: Slight +
<b>Alt. 2: Increase Mesh Size</b>	<b>Option A: Increase to 11”</b>	Slight +	Slight +	Slight – to slight +	No impact	Economic: Slight - Social: Slight +
	<b>Option B: Increase to 12”</b>	Slight +	Slight +	Slight – to slight +	No impact	Economic: Slight - Social: Slight +
<i>Note: Preferred alternatives selected so far are shaded.</i>						



New England Fishery Management Council

50 WATER STREET | NEWBURYPORT, MASSACHUSETTS 01950 | PHONE 978 465 0492 | FAX 978 465 3116  
Eric Reid, *Chair* | Thomas A. Nies, *Executive Director*

**DATE:** January 23, 2023

**TO:** Thomas A. Nies, Executive Director

**FROM:** Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC)

**SUBJECT: Terms of Reference – Acceptable biological catches for monkfish, 2023 through 2025**

The SSC met via webinar on January 20, 2023 to address the following Terms of Reference (TORs):

**Terms of Reference**

A. Consider the remand of the New England Fishery Management Council to reconsider the October 2022 recommendation of the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) for setting acceptable biological catches (ABCs) for monkfish in both the northern and southern management areas for fishing years (FY) 2023-2025.

B. Consider all relevant information about the status of monkfish provided by the 2022 Management Track Assessment, Peer Review Report, and the Monkfish Plan Development Team (PDT) focusing on this latest request of the Council.

C. Recommend monkfish ABCs that will prevent overfishing, meet the objectives of the fishery management plan, and consider the Council’s Risk Policy Statement. Specifically, the Council requests the SSC consider an approach that uses an average of the approach taken for setting FY 2020-2022 ABCs and the October SSC recommendation.

To address these TORs, the SSC considered the following information:

**Information**

1. Presentation: Monkfish PDT report (NEFMC staff)
2. Memo from Monkfish PDT to SSC re ABCs for FY 2023 – 2025, January 12, 2023
3. Framework Adjustment 13 draft environmental assessment, January 13, 2023
4. Memo from SSC to NEFMC re monkfish OFLs and ABCs, November 21, 2022

**Background Documents**

1. The Council’s Risk Policy Road Map (2016), that includes the Risk Policy Statement and Implementation Plan, see pp. 4-5 and 10-12.
2. State of the Ecosystem and Current Conditions. NOAA/NEFSC. Available at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/new-england-mid-atlantic/ecosystems/state-ecosystem-reports-northeast-us-shelf>
3. Memo from Monkfish PDT to SSC re OFLs and ABCs for FY 2023 – 2025, October 19, 2022 (typos later corrected)

4. Monkfish stock assessment
  - a. Draft 2022 monkfish stock assessment report
  - b. 2022 monkfish stock assessment peer review report
  - c. 2016 monkfish stock assessment and peer review report
  - d. 2019 monkfish stock assessment and peer review report
5. Index-Based Methods Work Group
  - a. Draft report and three individual peer review reports. Available at: <https://www.noaa.gov/information-technology/index-based-methods-working-group-id437>
  - b. Legault et al manuscript
6. Risk Policy Matrix for Monkfish
7. 2022 Monkfish Fishery Performance Report
8. Monkfish AP meeting summary, November 28, 2022
9. Monkfish Committee meeting summary, November 29, 2022

**SSC members in attendance:** Mike Carroll, Jeremy Collie, Kevin Friedland, Adrian Jordaan, Lisa Kerr, J.-J. Maguire, Conor McManus, Jason McNamee, Cate O’Keefe, Fred Serchuk, Kevin St. Martin, Terry Stockwell, Sam Truesdell, Hiro Uchida, John Wiedenmann, Lindsey Williams

## **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

*A. Consider the remand of the New England Fishery Management Council to reconsider the October 2022 recommendation of the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) for setting acceptable biological catches (ABCs) for monkfish in both the northern and southern management areas for fishing years (FY) 2023-2025.*

During the January 20, 2023 meeting, the SSC considered the Council’s remand of monkfish ABCs for FY 2023-2025 and supported the Council’s request to reconsider the ABCs for northern and southern monkfish management areas. The SSC considered the motion passed by the NEFMC which stated:

*Accept the SSC ABC recommendations for FY 2023-2025 (for both areas) and to remand the Monkfish ABCs for both areas back to the SSC to facilitate a transition to the appropriate application of Ismooth for monkfish stocks. Specifically, we request that the SSC consider setting ABCs for the FY 2023-2025 as the average of the Ismooth approach (multipliers applied to recent 3-year catch) and the recent ABC approach (Multipliers applied to the recent ABCs). Further, the Council notes that application of Ismooth multipliers should be revisited during the next monkfish assessment.*

*B. Consider all relevant information about the status of monkfish provided by the 2022 Management Track Assessment, Peer Review Report, and the Monkfish Plan Development Team (PDT) focusing on this latest request of the Council.*

The SSC considered all available information provided for the January 20, 2023 meeting, as well as information previously provided to the SSC for the October 26-27, 2022 meeting, focusing on the Council’s request.

*C. Recommend monkfish ABCs that will prevent overfishing, meet the objectives of the fishery management plan, and consider the Council’s Risk Policy Statement. Specifically, the Council requests the SSC consider an approach that uses an average of the approach taken for setting FY 2020-2022 ABCs and the October SSC recommendation.*

The SSC previously provided catch advice for northern and southern monkfish management areas in a November 21, 2022 memo to Executive Director Nies. The SSC catch advice recommendations were based on applying the Ismooth multipliers to the most recent 3-year average catch to calculate the Annual Catch Targets (ACT) for the northern and southern management areas, the ACT was increased by the management uncertainty buffer (3% for monkfish) to calculate ABCs. This was a change in the application of Ismooth multipliers, which were previously applied to recent ABCs which is inconsistent with best practices for use of the Ismooth approach. The more appropriate application of the Ismooth approach is to apply the multipliers to recent catch as survey indices are assumed to be directly related to removals (i.e., catch) and ABCs are not necessarily related to catch. Transitioning from applying the multipliers to recent ABCs to recent average catch resulted in a substantial reduction in catch advice for monkfish stocks (i.e., a 34% and 69% reduction in the northern and southern management areas, respectively). The NEFMC asked the SSC to consider a transition to the appropriate application of the Ismooth approach for monkfish stocks setting ABCs for the FY 2023-2025 constant as the average of the Ismooth approach (multipliers applied to recent 3-year catch) and the recent ABC approach (multipliers applied to the recent ABCs).

**The SSC recommends use of a transition approach as the basis for catch advice for monkfish in both the northern and southern management areas.**

**The SSC recommends OFL be unknown for the northern and southern management areas for FY 2023-2025 (as determined in advice provided in November 21, 2022 memo), and recommends revised ABCs of 6,224 mt for the northern management area and 5,861 mt for the southern management area to be held constant for FY 2023-2025.**

## **RATIONALE INCLUDING SIGNIFICANT SOURCES OF UNCERTAINTY**

The SSC was challenged in how to consider this remand but determined that consideration of a transition approach is reasonable and agreed with adoption of a transition approach to setting catch advice for FY 2023-2025. The transition approach recognizes that the application of Ismooth multipliers to catch is best practice but allows for a transition to alleviate fishery disruptions and adverse economic impacts that may result from substantial catch reductions in a single management action resulting from the correction to the Ismooth approach for setting catch advice. The SSC considered two transition approaches: 1) a constant ABC based on an average of the Ismooth multiplier applied to the most recent ABC (previously used approach for FY 2020-2022) and to 3-year average catch (approach proposed by the SSC in October 2022) and 2) a ramped ABC (phasing in the transition over FY 2023-2025). The SSC recognized that either approach transitions to the appropriate application of Ismooth multipliers to catch. During the SSC discussion a common concern raised with respect to both transition approaches was that the advice is based in part on recent ABCs that were derived from a previously rejected stock assessment.

The SSC recommended a transition approach that uses a constant ABC based on an average of the Ismooth multiplier applied to the most recent ABC (previously used approach for FY 2020-2022) and to 3-year average catch (approach proposed by the SSC in October 2022) as the basis for catch advice. This transition approach reduces catch advice by ~25% in the north and over 50% in the south from recent ABCs. This approach is consistent with the Council's request of the SSC.

Monkfish stock status is unknown as reference points are undetermined for this stock, which makes it challenging to determine whether ABCs will lead to overfishing. However, the proposed ABCs

represent large reductions from recent ABCs and the SSC believes the recommended ABCs are not likely to lead to overfishing. Neither management area has previously been declared overfished and while recent declines in the average survey indices in both the northern and southern areas resulted in Ismooth multipliers <1.0, the biomass indices are not at historically low levels, nor do they show any truncation of size classes in either management area. In addition, other surveys (i.e., ASMFC shrimp survey in the north and scallop survey in the south) show conflicting trends to the bottom trawl survey. The transition approach results in an ABC that is lower in the southern management area relative to the northern management area, an outcome consistent with results of the recent NEFMC surveys. Based on the chain sweep study, absolute biomass in the north is higher than in the south, which further supports a lower ABC in the south relative to the north. The SSC noted that adopting higher ABCs based on this transition approach would likely result in accepting additional risk, a fact that was acknowledged by the Council in deliberations over the motion to remand.

Information from members of the fishing industry was provided by the PDT and through public comment during the webinar indicating that recent monkfish catch is influenced by several factors. External drivers on monkfish fishing effort and landings include pandemic-related reductions, market dynamics with reduced prices in recent years, increased fishing costs (i.e. fuel costs), shifts in seasonal availability of monkfish to the fishery in relation to warming ocean temperatures (most notably in the southern management area), and fluctuations in targeting of monkfish and other species in response to price and abundance/availability differences (the skate fishery was noted to be an important interacting fishery for monkfish). It was noted that proposed increases in mesh size used for targeting monkfish have been supported by the fishing industry as a potential mechanism to increase product quality and size and reduce the likelihood of overfishing. The SSC highlighted the importance of these external factors in considering a transition plan for ABC advice. The public comments made during the meeting were consistent with the Monkfish AP input in the fishery performance report provided to the SSC.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

During the SSC discussion, general concerns were raised regarding the appropriateness of the underlying assumptions of the Ismooth approach for setting catch advice for monkfish. The approach adjusts catch advice based on recent catch and changes in relative abundance derived from the survey which implies that catch is a key driver of changes in resource biomass and that the resource will respond to changes in catch. The SSC recognized socioeconomic impacts and catch stability for the fishery as important factors in recommending revised catch advice based on a transition approach. This highlights challenges with the ABC control rules that do not directly articulate a path for the SSC to consider stability in catch advice setting.

**SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1. The SSC recommends use of a transition approach as the basis for catch advice for monkfish in both the northern and southern management areas.**
- 2. The SSC recommends OFL be unknown for the northern and southern management areas for FY 2023-2025 (as determined in advice provided in November 21, 2022 memo), and recommends revised ABCs of 6,224 mt for the northern management area and 5,861 mt for the southern management area to be held constant for FY 2023-2025.**

<b>Fishing Year</b>	<b>Management Area</b>	<b>OFL (mt)</b>	<b>ABC (mt)</b>
2023-2025	Northern	Unknown	6,224
2023-2025	Southern	Unknown	5,861