

NOAA Fisheries

**New England and
Mid-Atlantic Geographic
Strategic Plan
2024–2028**

WORKING DRAFT

June 2023





Joint Letter from Science Director and Regional Administrator

We are excited to present to you the updated NOAA Fisheries' Geographic Strategic Plan for the New England and Mid-Atlantic region. This plan outlines how the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office and the Northeast Fisheries Science Center will implement the three strategic goals of NOAA Fisheries for the period of 2024-2028.


Our region is home to diverse and complex ecosystems that are vital to some of the most valuable fisheries and oldest fishing communities in the nation. These ecosystems also support iconic species such as the North Atlantic right whale, Atlantic salmon, and Atlantic cod. We recognize the importance of ensuring that our conservation and management efforts are equitable, inclusive, and accessible to all, and that they take into consideration the principles of environmental justice.

Our plan focuses on modernizing our fishery-dependent data systems, rebuilding and maintaining healthy fish stocks through improved understanding, monitoring, and enforcement, and prioritizing recovery efforts for protected species. We also emphasize the need for climate-forward management in the region, fully accounting for marine resources and fisheries in offshore wind energy development, and improving international coordination to ensure the sustainability of fisheries and the recovery of endangered and protected species.

We also recognize the importance of promoting equity and environmental justice in our decision-making processes. We will strive to incorporate principles of fairness and justice into our resource conservation and management efforts, and consider the social, economic, and environmental impacts of our actions on vulnerable and marginalized communities. We are committed to improving and increasing engagement and accessibility with these communities in our region.

In this plan, we remain committed to establishing a diverse workforce that reflects the communities we serve, and promoting a culture of inclusivity and accessibility within our organizations. We will work towards providing equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their background or identity, and ensuring that our programs and services are accessible to all members of the public. These are crucial elements to continued excellence and innovation within our region. We also commit to working closely with our partners to strengthen collaborative science and management activities, and to reduce unnecessary regulatory burden on our fishing industry and other stakeholders in order to maximize economic growth.

Furthermore, we are committed to the well-being of our employees, and we will prioritize employee wellness initiatives that promote a healthy and supportive work environment. We recognize that our employees are essential to the success of our mission, and we will



work towards providing a safe, inclusive, and supportive workplace that fosters professional growth and development.

We are proud of this updated plan and are excited about the opportunities it presents for NOAA Fisheries' work in the New England and Mid-Atlantic region. We look forward to working with our partners and stakeholders to implement these strategies and achieve our shared goals of promoting sustainable fisheries and supporting the communities that depend on them by protecting and conserving our marine resources.

Sincerely,

Jon Hare, Ph.D
Science Director
Northeast Center

Michael Pentony
Regional Administrator
Greater Atlantic Region

NOAA Fisheries – Science, Service, and Stewardship

Vision

The potential of our ocean ecosystems is realized—using innovation and understanding of a changing world—for the benefit of the nation.

Mission

NOAA Fisheries is responsible for the stewardship of the nation's living marine resources and their habitat. We provide vital services for the nation: Sustainable and productive fisheries; safe sources of seafood; the recovery and conservation of protected resources; and healthy ecosystems—all backed by sound science and an ecosystem-based approach to management.

Organization

The [Northeast Fisheries Science Center](#) studies fishery species and fisheries, monitors and models ocean ecosystems, and provides reliable advice for policy makers. The Center promotes recovery and long-term sustainability of marine life in the region, supports both wild and cultured seafood harvests, helps sustain coastal communities, and generates economic opportunities and benefits from the use of these resources.

The Northeast Fisheries Science Center is headquartered in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, and has facilities in Milford, Connecticut; Orono, Maine; Sandy Hook, New Jersey; and Narragansett, Rhode Island.

The [Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office](#) works hand in hand with the regional fishery management councils and other partner agencies, the fishing industry, international partners, non-governmental organizations, tribal nations, and members of the public to achieve our goals of sustainable use of living marine resources, conservation of the habitats upon which these resources depend, and the protection of marine mammals and endangered and threatened species that spend all or part of their lives in the ocean.

The Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office is headquartered in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and has facilities in Orono, Maine; Sandy Hook, New Jersey; Annapolis, Maryland; and Gloucester Point, Virginia. In addition, port agents and other industry liaison staff are located in Sedgewick, Maine; Portland, Maine; Gloucester, Massachusetts; New Bedford, Massachusetts; Point Judith, Rhode Island; Saunderstown, Rhode Island; East Hampton, New York; Toms River, New Jersey; Northfield, New Jersey; Belle Haven, Virginia; and Hampton, Virginia.

Local Landscape Opportunities and Challenges

Our region spans from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, to the Scotian Shelf in the Gulf of Maine and is well-known for historic fisheries, popular coastlines, and complex ecosystems. We strive to manage, preserve, and enhance valuable resources and their habitat. Environmental factors in our region are changing at an unprecedented pace. We must be strategic with a willingness to move in new directions, while choosing what must be phased out to provide needed capacity for new initiatives.

We partner to achieve our mission. Our partners include other NOAA line offices, the New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Councils, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, federal agencies, states, tribes, commercial and recreational fishing stakeholders, national and regional aquaculture associations, foundations, non-governmental organizations, and academia.

Challenges:

- The magnitude and pace of concurrent changes we are observing in climate, fish and protected species distributions, fisheries, and other marine uses inhibits our ability to research, manage, and respond in a way that meets our mission.
- The pace and level of expansion in offshore energy development, which interacts with every facet of our scientific and management enterprise, has scaled beyond our current management capacity.
- Meeting the increased needs for data collection, analyses, and products to provide the most accurate advice in light of aging infrastructure, vessel operability, and legacy data and information systems.
- Navigating complex and burdensome administrative processes in concert with a challenging financial management environment that increases staff workload and impacts our ability to recruit and retain talented staff.
- Balancing diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and environmental justice needs while acknowledging barriers to communities, potential and existing staff and trade-offs between funding these initiatives and meeting mission needs.

Top Geographic Priorities

NOAA Fisheries has sustained world-class fisheries, productive ecosystems, and resilient seafood communities. Among the highest priorities in our region are to promote the growth of sustainable fisheries and aquaculture while also safeguarding our marine resources and the ecosystems they rely on, ensuring their sustainability for generations to come.

- Conduct world class research and monitoring of living marine resources, ecosystems, oceanography, habitat, fishing industries and communities to provide high quality scientific advice for marine resource management.

- Evaluate and mitigate the impacts of emerging industries and issues (e.g., energy development, infrastructure modernization, new fisheries, aquaculture, climate) on resources, stakeholders, and the provision of scientific advice.
- Identify, monitor, and respond to impacts from changing climate, oceanic conditions, and coastal processes affecting the distribution and productivity of marine resources, habitats, and communities.
- Ensure the survival and recovery of endangered U.S. marine species, such as the North Atlantic right whale.
- Develop effective and environmentally compatible aquaculture practices to improve production of farmed seafood.
- Facilitate and increase the accessibility of information in support of regional priorities, for both our staff and our constituents., for both our staff and our constituents.
- Utilize innovative technologies to optimize efficiencies and computing capacity to better meet our research and management needs while maintaining rigorous protection of confidential information.
- Rebalance our approach to information technology, facilities, and administrative services to more efficiently and effectively meet our mission and adapt to a changing workforce.

Strategic Goal 1

Adaptively manage fisheries for sustainability and economic competitiveness

We expect to adaptively manage fisheries for sustainability and economic competitiveness by optimizing commercial harvest, ensuring recreational opportunities, promoting marine aquaculture, and restoring habitat. Effective science-based management is essential to reaching optimum yield while preventing overfishing. Annual commercial landings in our region total nearly \$2 billion and recreational fisheries result in \$2.3 billion in trip expenditures, while a number of notable species are underutilized. We intend to continue our close collaboration with the New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Councils, Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, state and fishing industry partners, the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization, and local organizations and stakeholders.

Key Performance Indicators:

- Maximize the economic value and community resilience of the region’s fishing and seafood sectors.
- Complete core fisheries-independent surveys, tagging studies, age and growth, maturity studies, food habits studies, and other data collections to provide information critical to population assessments and resource management.
- Complete management actions necessary to achieve sustainable conservation and management of marine resources and their habitats with support of our scientific enterprise.
- Increase efficiencies in planning, development, and mitigation of wind development and expansion in the region.
- Increase sustainable aquaculture production and research in the Northeast Geographic Region.
- Assess and modify as necessary core data collection methodologies that may be impacted by infrastructure and/or climate change impacts.

Strategies

1.1 **Manage stocks for optimum yield and build climate and economic resilience in U.S. seafood and fishing sectors**

Rebuild overfished stocks, prevent overfishing with improved quota monitoring and fisheries enforcement, and support existing and novel market uses of legally caught fish using the best available science. Continue to implement the Next Generation Stock Assessment Improvement Plan. Support the New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery

Management Councils and collaborate where appropriate with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission in addressing regulatory actions to achieve optimum yield. Explore opportunities for alternative management strategies for recreational fisheries. Conduct economic analysis and social science research to support climate and economic resilience throughout the region. Complete core fisheries-independent surveys, tagging studies, age and growth, maturity studies, and food habits studies to provide information critical to population assessments.

1.2 Advance climate science and ecosystem-based fishery management (EBFM) to increase the sustainability of marine fisheries

Develop approaches to support ecosystem-based fisheries management and stock assessments and incorporate ecosystem considerations into management advice and research. Encourage and collaborate with the Councils to further develop ecosystem-based approaches to fisheries management and address changing climate conditions. Continue research and analysis activities crucial to climate and EBFM approaches, including food webs, climate modeling, and Status of the Ecosystem reporting. Integrate our understanding of the complexity of marine ecosystems into evidence-based decisions to inform multi-species/multi-objective resources management strategies for fisheries and aquaculture operations. Include equitable climate mitigation and adaptation in our management solutions. Conduct research and monitoring, and provide consultation on the potential effects and mitigation of offshore wind energy development on marine habitats, fisheries, protected resources, and their ecosystems.

1.3 Mitigate and adapt to climate-driven changes in fisheries habitat

Protect known essential fish habitat and restore damaged habitats for managed species and their prey to help maintain productive fisheries. Adapt research and management to climate-driven changes in essential fish habitat through consideration of new survey designs and laboratory research regarding the impacts of temperature and acidification on fisheries resources. Monitor and study essential fish habitat where it occurs and engage in multi-disciplinary and multi-agency collaborations with managers, academic researchers, and industry partners.

1.4 Diversify our data collection technologies and expand/modernize data products and services

Use best practices to conduct world-class science. Develop and implement new methods that more accurately, precisely, or effectively collect data. Ensure data collections meet FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable) principles. Support fishery information networks to advance user-centered data platforms for greater efficiency and lower costs to improve the ability to effectively manage stocks for optimum yield and recreational opportunities. Continue the development of the Fishery Dependent Data Initiative. Displace legacy fishery-dependent data systems for modern and maintainable systems that integrate and simplify fisheries reporting, improve data quality, and enhance monitoring and analysis to better support management decisions, advance scientific understanding, and facilitate the elimination of redundant reporting burdens. Optimize data acquisition, management, and

delivery systems for fishery-independent data collections by upgrading legacy databases and documenting all data management processes

1.5 Ensure equity and accessibility for tribal, indigenous, and underserved communities

Develop and implement a regional equity and environmental justice (EEJ) strategy to ensure equitable consideration of input and meaningful involvement in science, conservation, and management of all people, regardless of race, color, national origin, language barriers, or income. Engage with underserved communities to better understand environmental justice concerns and build partnerships. Seek understanding of indigenous knowledge to inform agency science and decision-making. Review programs and policies to determine whether tribal, indigenous, or underserved communities face systemic barriers to accessing benefits and services. Increase the ability of underserved communities to engage and participate in funding opportunities, public meetings, and other Agency initiatives. Create training programs to provide underserved communities the information and tools needed to confidently and productively engage in fishery management decision processes and participate in marine fisheries (commercial, subsistence, recreational, and aquaculture).

1.6 Counter IUU fishing activity

Promote sustainable fisheries management with our counterparts in Canada and the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization to prevent IUU fishing and impose consequences for IUU fishing.

1.7 Adapt to Wind Energy Development in the EEZ

Coordinate with the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) to develop fisheries resource survey mitigation strategies for offshore wind farm areas. Collaborate effectively between GARFO and the NEFSC to conduct our scientific operations and provide advice to BOEM related to sustainability of marine resources. Collect data and provide information relevant to assessing the economic impact of expanding offshore wind development on the commercial and recreational fishing fleets and communities. Address intersections between offshore aquaculture planning and offshore wind development. Support the sustainable development of offshore wind energy by providing expertise, data, and analysis to ensure marine resources are well described and impacts are avoided, minimized, or mitigated. Mitigate the impacts of offshore wind energy on NOAA surveys, data collections, and assessment advice. We will fill research gaps by developing and implementing a regional research plan to understand the impacts of offshore wind development on the marine ecosystem and marine resources. Advance mitigation science and planning to ensure impacts that cannot be avoided are effectively mitigated on marine resources—fishing communities, protected species, habitats, and ecosystems.

Strategic Goal 2

Safeguard protected species and propel their recovery

We are committed to recovering threatened and endangered marine and anadromous species and in preventing harm or harassment of marine mammals and sea turtles. Increased human interactions (e.g., bycatch, incidental take, and anthropogenic noise) and changing environmental conditions (e.g., warming temperatures, acidification, pollution, sediment runoff, and habitat degradation) have contributed to the decline of many of these marine species. We will continue to advance our scientific understanding of the escalating impacts of climate change, offshore wind energy development, and other impacts to protected species. Working with partners, we will develop conservation policies, new technologies, guidance, and regulations to conserve and recover protected marine species, and to consult on proposed actions to mitigate threats to their survival. Our proactive outreach and efforts to enforce and promote compliance with our conservation efforts help to protect these vulnerable marine species.

Key Performance Indicators:

- Ensure formal and informal Endangered Species Act consultations are completed within NMFS' monitored timeframes to the greatest extent possible.
- Increase the number and percentage of recovery actions ongoing or completed.
- Promote the development of new technologies to monitor, assess, and conserve protected species.

Strategies

2.1 Implement actions to recover endangered and threatened species

Respond to the species at greatest risk of extinction and work toward addressing their most critical needs for recovery through science and recovery actions. Leverage partnerships to collaborate on actions to stabilize declining populations such as North Atlantic right whales and Atlantic salmon. Protect and restore habitat where it presents a barrier to species recovery. Conduct emergency interventions for protection or recovery of animals in poor health to directly benefit highly endangered species. Leverage early engagement with Federal action agencies prior to consultations to alter project outcomes for better conservation and recovery of at risk species. Work with ocean-related industry members, scientists, environmental organizations, academia, law enforcement agencies, and other stakeholders to develop and enforce bycatch and entanglement prevention measures domestically and internationally.

2.2 Model and predict the effects of climate change on protected species to improve conservation outcomes

Understand and apply science and observations to understand and address the environmental effects of climate change on protected marine species resources and their habitat. Investigate stranded, entangled, or out-of-habitat marine mammals to document changes in range, health, disease status, or other findings to inform development or validation of climate change models. Communicate those impacts on the health, conservation, and recovery of protected marine species. Provide the science to assess climate vulnerability and develop climate-ready approaches to enhance resilience and adaptation strategies for protected species and their habitats, develop regulatory approaches to address climate change, and incorporate conservation recommendations into management and recovery plans.

2.3 Expand the use of advanced and innovative technologies

Increase our capacity to assess the status of vulnerable species by expanding the use of advanced technologies (e.g., autonomous and uncrewed systems, artificial intelligence in species detection, satellite tags, passive acoustics, and genetic techniques such as eDNA). Use advanced technologies for species protection and conservation including the development of on-demand/ropeless fishing to prevent entanglements, noise abatement methods, and dynamic management measures to protect species when they are present.

2.4 Protect and restore important habitats necessary for the recovery of endangered marine species

Protect healthy habitat and restore lost or damaged habitat designated critical to recovery of endangered species. Restore and improve access to spawning habitat in streams and rivers and restore coastal habitat.

2.5 Protect marine species while supporting ocean-based economic growth

Provide evidence-based scientific advice on the impacts to protected marine species and their habitat from near-term and long-term effects of competing ocean uses, such as offshore wind or other energy development, aquaculture siting, offshore area leasing, shipping, acoustic survey and other ocean noise, commercial fishing, and other ocean-based activities. Conduct science, provide advice, and require mitigation to support management decisions and rulemaking to ensure continued protection of marine species and their habitat.

Strategic Goal 3

Diversify our workforce, promote equity and environmental justice, and improve our mission performance through organizational excellence

The success of our mission relies on the expertise and dedication of our diverse and talented employees and partners. Therefore, we are fully committed to fostering a culture that is diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible, both within our organization and throughout the region. We recognize that organizational excellence is a continuous process aimed at enhancing our ability to fulfill our mission, support our people, our stakeholders, and the organization. We aim to foster an organization that is not only effective and efficient, but also agile and adaptable to meet emerging challenges in our region.

Key Performance Indicators:

- Optimize workplace flexibilities, including remote work and telework availability.
- Increase outreach and responsiveness to stakeholders.
- Develop and implement regional Equity and Environmental Justice strategy.
- Increase diverse representation of staff at all levels; increase diversity in internship programs, employee committees, and employee resource groups.

Strategies

3.1 Promote total worker wellness

Foster strong, safe, respectful, and inclusive relationships virtually and in the workplace, including on vessels and in remote locations. Continue collaborative efforts to address harassment of staff, including fisheries observers, in the region. Provide training and resources for wellness for individuals, teams, and organizations. Improve behavioral health literacy in the workforce; recognize and respond to signs of mental health issues among staff (e.g., stress, burnout, fatigue). Support NOAA Fisheries Total Worker Wellness program, leveraging our Wellness Council members and implementing initiatives in our region. Provide staff the time and space to utilize these resources.

3.2 Improve workforce diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility

Look for greater synergies across NEFSC and GARFO to enhance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Build more diverse pipelines by prioritizing and expanding paid internship opportunities for students who have faced barriers to access or socio-economic challenges. Improve hiring practices to capitalize on hiring authorities that expand diversity of candidates. Continue to build an inclusive work environment by training staff and providing resources to new hires. Promote participation in employee committees and resource groups and leverage knowledge and expertise of these groups to enhance DEIA initiatives.

3.3 Develop workforce skills for the future

Continue efforts to develop growth mindsets and nurture continuous learning, leveraging the Learning Strategic Implementation Plan and our GARFO-NEFSC Learning Implementation Team. Hire strategically to address evolving skill needs. Enhance workforce proficiency through training, internships, details or reassignments.

3.4 Embrace a new paradigm for the workplace

Build robust hybrid work environments and leverage in-person activities. Provide IT equipment and tools to meet dynamic needs and support new ways of doing business. Help all employees, including those working remotely, to experience a shared agency identity, common mission, and sense of belonging, with a healthy work-life balance. Continue working in existing facilities to build and enhance specialized use space, meeting space, and flexible (hotelling) spaces for staff.

3.5 Adaptively manage infrastructure


Work with NOAA Fisheries headquarters and partners for leased and owned facilities upgrades based on mission requirements. In Woods Hole, continue to participate in Resilient Woods Hole efforts within the community. Continue to maximize use of facilities based on mission requirements and foster partnerships and collaborations through joint facility use agreements and other mechanisms. Create an adaptive infrastructure that enhances agility in responding to new challenges. Utilize technological advances to reduce overall costs, optimize data and computing capacity, reduce hardware obsolescence, increase physical and IT security, and reduce server hosting requirements and on-site maintenance.

3.6 Optimize resources

Make strategic planning an important driver of the budgetary and annual allocation processes. Continue to improve out-year budget planning, workforce planning, and leveraging partners in academia, industry, and other disciplines. Investigate ways to improve internal purchasing and hiring processes. Explore opportunities to improve complex administrative processes by identifying inefficiencies and implementing streamlined solutions.

3.7 Expand internal and stakeholder communications

Improve communications with stakeholders by evaluating existing tools and methods and developing flexible approaches to communicate more effectively and efficiently. Enhance outreach to our community and promote events that connect staff with stakeholders, such as the Cooperative Research Summit. Improve timeliness of communication to stakeholders on important topics such as offshore wind, right whales, and surveys. Coordinate strategic communications across the agency to improve the quality and frequency of internal and



external communications on priority agency issues, high-interest topics, and news across regional offices and science centers. This includes expanding our reach to new audiences.

3.8 **Implement an Equity and Environmental Justice Strategy**

Serve all stakeholders equitably by engaging underserved communities in the science, conservation, and management of our region’s ocean resources and their habitat. Identify underserved communities and address access barriers they face. Provide guidance for incorporating and prioritizing EEJ in ongoing and future activities. Develop strategies and tools to remove these barriers to and more equitably and effectively serve all communities.

3.9 **Build Coalitions**

Continue to foster and build our regional, national, and international coalitions in resource management and scientific research to support the NOAA Fisheries mission. Cooperate and collaborate with other countries and international organizations as it pertains to the recovery of endangered species, such as Atlantic salmon and the North Atlantic right whale, and other protected resources. Work with international partners to explore and improve our scientific knowledge of cross boundary species and habitats. Continue to foster our existing regional and national working relationships and pursue new partnership opportunities.

Implementing this Plan

Between 2024 and 2028, this plan will serve as primary guidance for planning, budgeting, and execution. Activity Plans and Milestones will be developed to focus execution on these strategies and to track progress, and key performance indicators will provide evidence of success.

