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Science Advisory Report 2026/022

NAFO DIVISION 4T YELLOWTAIL FLOUNDER (*MYZOPSETTA FERRUGINEA*): STOCK ASSESSMENT IN 2025 AND REBUILDING PLAN SCIENTIFIC REQUIREMENTS

CONTEXT

This Fisheries Science Advisory Report is from the regional peer review meeting of March 11, 2026 on Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence, NAFO Division 4T, Yellowtail Flounder (*Myzopsetta ferruginea*) Stock Assessment and Science Advice to Support the Rebuilding Plan. Additional publications from this meeting will be posted on the [Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) Science Advisory Schedule] as they become available.

SCIENCE ADVICE

Status

- The biomass of southern Gulf of St. Lawrence (sGSL) Yellowtail Flounder aged 5+ has been in the Critical Zone of the Precautionary Approach (PA) Framework since 1997.
- In 2025, the stock biomass was 8,269 tonnes (t) (95% CI: 5,666-10,872 t), which is 32% of the limit reference point (LRP), with 100% probability of being below the LRP, maintaining the stock in the Critical Zone.
- Fishing mortality (F) of ages 4-10+ has been 0 since 2023 when the commercial fishery was closed. Thus, there is 100% probability of being below the removal reference.

Trends

- Biomass declined from the Healthy Zone in the late 1980s to reach the Critical Zone in the 1990s, and has remained below the LRP since 1997.
- Fishing mortality increased gradually from the mid1980s to late 2010s, but remained low (F<0.05) at the stock level throughout the time series, as fisheries were localized.
- Natural mortality (M) was high and variable throughout the time series (M=0.5-1.3), but M increased between 1985 and 2009, declined through 2019, and then increased again from 2020 to 2025.
- Persistently elevated M remains the primary factor explaining the longstanding decline and lack of rebuilding of the stock.
- Recruitment increased from the mid1980s to the early 2000s, declined sharply until about 2014, and then increased again through 2022, remaining at intermediate levels in recent years.
- Length at age has declined since the early 1990s and has remained at low levels through 2010 to present. Length- and age-at maturity also declined over the time series.

Ecosystem and Climate Change Considerations

- Elevated natural mortality is consistent with ecosystem-wide increases in size-dependent mortality across demersal fishes in the sGSL, largely driven by grey seal predation.

Stock Advice

- The rebuilding target should be defined as the biomass where there is at least a 75% probability the stock remains at or above the LRP for five consecutive years. To reduce the likelihood of returning to the Critical Zone, biomass projections under harvest should indicate a positive trajectory.
- In the absence of fishing mortality, the stock is projected to remain in the Critical Zone under prevailing productivity (current recruitment, growth, maturity, and M). Timeline to rebuild (T_{min}) cannot be estimated due to low productivity; generation time (12-16 years; 15 years selected for projections) is used per guidelines.
- Only scenarios combining historically high recruitment and lower M, in the absence of F, projected the stock to reach the LRP with a 70% probability within 15 years, still not attaining the rebuilding target.

Other Management Questions

- Additional measurable objectives of the rebuilding plan include:
  - Increase the proportion of Yellowtail Flounder aged 7+ toward the historical levels observed during productive periods (60%).
  - Given that large quantities of Winter Flounder were historically caught in the Yellowtail Flounder fishery and both species are currently in the Critical Zone, the status of the two stocks is closely linked. Therefore, science advice for Yellowtail Flounder should be considered alongside Winter Flounder, particularly when evaluating rebuilding progress.
- Rebuilding progress will be tracked with the assessment model as part of the 5-year assessment cycle, with a mid-cycle interim indicator update.

BASIS FOR ASSESSMENT

Assessment Details

Year Assessment Approach was Approved

The state-space age-structure stock assessment model was developed and adopted for this assessment with data up to 2025 (Turcotte et al. In prep.[1]).

Assessment Type

Full Assessment: Full peer-review stock assessment.

Most Recent Assessment Date

1. Last Full Assessment: February 2021 (DFO 2021a; Rolland et al. 2022).

[1] Turcotte, F., McDermid, J.L. and Sutton, J.T. In preparation. NAFO Division 4T Yellowtail Flounder (*Myzopsetta ferruginea)*: Stock Assessment to 2025 and Rebuilding Plan Scientific Requirements. DFO Can. Sci. Advis. Sec. Res. Doc.

2. Last Interim-Year Update: December 2024 (DFO 2025).

Stock Assessment Approach

1. Broad category: single stock assessment model
2. Specific category: State-Space and age-based

Ecosystem and Climate Change Assessment Approach

Ecosystem effects are incorporated implicitly but directly into the model by estimating time varying natural mortality and qualitatively, through literature review demonstrating the impacts of grey seal predation driving natural mortality and shifts in size/age structure of demersal fishes in the sGSL.

Stock Structure Assumption

NAFO Division 4T Yellowtail Flounder is considered a single biological unit, primarily distributed in shallow, nearshore waters of the sGSL, with historically localized fisheries.

Reference Points

- Limit Reference Point (LRP): Proxy (1985-1989) for $0.4B_{MSY}$: 25,800 t
- Candidate Upper Stock Reference (USR): Proxy for $0.8B_{MSY}$: 51,600 t
- Candidate Removal Reference (RR): Proxy for F_{MSY}: 0.005
- Candidate Target Reference Point (TRP): Proxy for B_{MSY}: 64,500 t

Data

Data inputs to the stock assessment model were:

- Annual fishery total catch and proportions in numbers at age by fleet (seine and trawl; 1985-2022)
- Annual proportions in numbers at age and age aggregated biomass index from DFO research vessel (RV) survey (1985-2025)
- Maturity-at-age from the RV survey (1985-2025)
- Weight-at-age from the RV survey (1985-2025)

Data changes: Age composition data was used rather than size-aggregated catch and size-aggregated survey biomass. The age length keys (ALKs) now include information from the earlier period of the time series, allowing to refine the resolution of growth and maturity dynamics. The vessel and gear in RV survey changed in 2021 and length-dependent conversion factors were applied (Benoît and Yin 2023) to maintain the continuity of the survey time-series.

ASSESSMENT

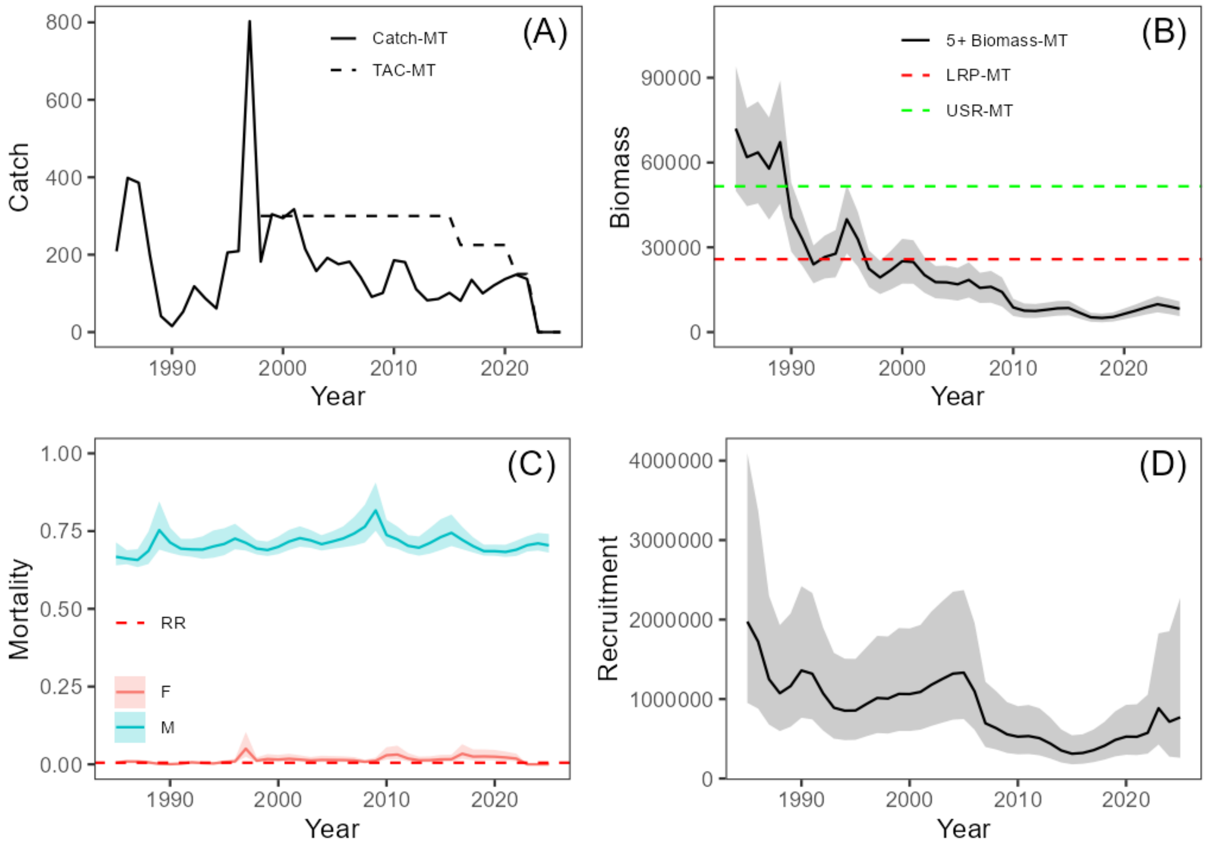

Figure 1. (A – upper left panel) Catch (solid line) and Total Allowable Catch (TAC; dashed line) in metric tonnes (MT), (B – upper right panel) 5+ Biomass in relation to the Limit Reference Point (LRP; red) and candidate Upper Stock Reference (USR; green), (C – bottom left panel) Fishing Mortality (F age 4-10+; red solid) in relation to the candidate Removal Reference (RR; red dashed) and Natural Mortality (mean M at all ages; blue), (D- bottom right panel) Solid line shows recruitment (numbers) with grey shaded 95% confidence intervals. All graphs share a horizontal axis labeled Year ranging from 1985-2025.

Stock Status and Trends

Current status

The stock, as measured through the biomass of Yellowtail Flounder age-5+ (hereafter stock biomass), has remained in the Critical Zone of the PA since 1997.

Biomass

Stock biomass has declined since the late 1980s and has remained below the LRP since 1997 (Figure 1B). Since the last assessment up to 2020, stock biomass was estimated to have varied between 7,600 and 9,900 t, and was 8,269 t (32% of LRP) in 2025. Age/size structure is severely truncated; older (7+) and larger fish (≥25 cm) are rare in recent years. Recent increases in total biomass reflect higher abundance of ages 1 to 4 rather than rebuilding of ages 5+.

Abundance of smaller fish (<25 cm) increased from 1985 to 2014, dropped in 2015, but subsequently increased to levels comparable to the late 2000s. Meanwhile, fish of harvestable size (≥25 cm; equivalent to ages 5+) declined from the mid-1990s to a sustained low level from 2010 to present.

Trends in biomass across the sGSL are broadly similar to those around the Magdalen Islands where the bulk of the fishery occurred. The decline of large, older fish began sooner in the whole sGSL, but occurred more rapidly in the Magdalen Islands. The result is that both areas experienced a roughly 90% collapse in the biomass of large, older fish.

Mortality

Mean fishing mortality (F ages 4–10+) is low relative to M (annual mean M at all ages) across the time series (F<0.05; Figure 1C). While the fishery was active, F was the lowest in the earliest years of the time series (1985-1995). F gradually increased through the late 1990s and 2000s, coinciding with periods of higher landings (particularly 1995-2012) lower abundance of older fish. Beginning around 2020, F began to decline again, reflecting reduced fishing activity and decreasing availability of commercial-sized fish. The fishery was closed following the 2022 season, and F has dropped to 0 where it has since remained. Fishing mortality has been consistently low relative to natural mortality throughout the time series, meaning fishing is not a dominant driver of stock dynamics.

Natural mortality is strongly time-varying, age-dependent, and consistently high particularly among older fish (Figure 1C). M rose steadily from the late 1980s to roughly 2008, with older age groups (age group 8-9 and group 10+) exhibiting the most pronounced increases, with M often exceeding 1.0. Following this increase, M declined moderately between approximately 2009 and 2019 across all modeled age groups (4–7, 8–9, 10+), but remained elevated relative to historic 1980s values. During this moderate decrease, M for older ages commonly remained around 0.8–1.0, high enough to prevent rebuilding and no recovery of age structure. M increased again from 2020 to 2025, with strong signals across all age groups. This sustained increase in M aligns with independent RV survey-based total mortality estimates, which also rose sharply through the late 1980s and 1990s, confirming that natural mortality, not fishing, was driving overall total mortality.

Recruitment

Recruitment (age-1) varied in multi-year patterns over the time series (Figure 1D) with no stock-recruitment relationship supported over the observed range of values. Recruitment increased from the mid-1980s into the early 2000s, declined strongly through 2014, and then rose again to 2022, remaining at intermediate levels in recent years.

Current Status

Yellowtail Flounder stock biomass has been under the LRP since 1997. In 2025, stock biomass was 32% of the LRP and the probability that stock biomass was under the LRP was 100%. In 2025, F was 0 and 100% probability of being below the removal reference.

History of Landings

Landings data from 1960 to 1984 are considered unreliable because the species of flatfish caught was often unspecified. Moreover, the landings of all flatfishes were considered to have been underestimated in this early time period (Morin et al. 1998). Over the time series (1985 to 2025), Yellowtail Flounder landings were variable (Figure 1A) and were fished with both seine and trawl gear. As the fishery progressed, it became concentrated nearshore around the

Magdalen Islands. High landings in 1997 led to the implementation of a total allowable catch (TAC). The TAC was around 300 t from 1998 to 2015, 225 t from 2016 to 2020, 150 t in 2021 and 2022. Yellowtail Flounder landings in 2021 and 2022 were 148 and 137 t, respectively. The fishery was closed in 2023 to 2025, with only 200 kg landed as bycatch in 2023.

Ecosystem and Climate Change Considerations

Grey seals in the Northwest Atlantic constitute a single population and are assessed as such (Hammill et al. 2023). While there is a herd that breeds in the Gulf of St. Lawrence (GSL) in early winter, grey seals are highly mobile and readily move between the GSL, Scotian Shelf, and Gulf of Maine throughout the year (Breed et al. 2006). The Canadian east coast grey seal population has been rapidly increasing since the 1960s, from 7,800 individuals in 1960 to 360,300 in 2021 (Hammil et al. 2023). A slowing in the rate of increase of the population has been observed in recent years, likely due to density-dependent factors.

Evidence indicates that the lack of recovery of sGSL groundfish stocks reflects substantial increases in natural mortality among large individuals across the demersal fish community (Swain & Benoît 2015). A major driver of this elevated natural mortality is predation by grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*), which has been linked to widespread mortality increases among adult groundfish (Benoît & Swain 2008; Swain & Benoît 2015; Neuenhoff et al. 2019; Rossi et al. 2021) and pelagic fish stocks (Benoît & Rail 2016; Turcotte et al. 2021; van Beveren et al. 2024).

The steady rise of M from the late 1980s to roughly 2008, with older age groups showing the strongest increases corresponds to the same time period when many sGSL demersal species experienced accelerating size-dependent mortality linked to grey seal predation. Analysis of production rates (surplus production per unit biomass) versus biomass shows a negative but nonsignificant slope, consistent with compensatory dynamics and no evidence of an Allee effect.

For the rebuilding plan, habitat was explored for a link to rebuilding potential. While the sGSL has experienced a trend towards warmer waters, shorter duration of ice season, and lower ice volume (Galbraith et al. 2025), there is currently no evidence that habitat availability is linked to rebuilding potential of Yellowtail Flounder.

Stock Advice

In the absence of fishing mortality and under current productivity, the stock is projected to remain in the Critical Zone with 100% probability for the next 15 years.

Rebuilding target and timeline

To be consistent with other rebuilding plans in the sGSL and in line with the guidance, a rebuilding target could be defined as the biomass where there is at least a 75% probability that the stock is at or above the LRP. This rebuilding target could be made more robust by incorporating a requirement that the stock be at or above the LRP for 5 consecutive years with positive projections under harvest. These qualifiers are consistent with DFO science guidelines that state that the rebuilding target should be set far enough above the LRP to minimize the probability of falling below the LRP in the short to medium term (DFO 2021b).

Given that under prevailing productivity conditions (current recruitment, growth, maturity, and M), the stock is not expected to increase, the timeline to rebuild (T_{min}) cannot be estimated due to low productivity; generation time (12-16 years; 15 years selected for projections) is therefore used per guidelines.

Projections and likelihood to rebuild

Projections were performed with low recruitment levels (2020 to 2024) to reflect current recruitment, and high recruitment (1985 to 1990), whereas four scenarios of M by age group were included: M (2020 to 2024) to reflect current M levels, high M (1985-1990), intermediate M (2000-2005), and highest M (2010-2015). Natural mortality scenarios were performed across the two recruitment scenarios, for a total of 8 population forecasts. Projection uncertainty increases with horizon length; these results illustrate conditions needed for rebuilding rather than predict outcomes.

Only scenarios combining historically high recruitment and the lowest M approach the LRP in 15 years, but even then with only ~70% probability of being above the LRP. As a result, there is no scenario where the stock is able to reach the rebuilding target (≥75%) in a generation, let alone for 5 consecutive years.

PROCEDURE FOR INTERIM-YEAR UPDATES

Rebuilding plan progress should be tracked as part of the multi-year assessment cycle which occurs every 5 years. An interim update occurs at the halfway point between full stock assessments. The interim update will consist of an updated indicator of stock status from the RV survey for fish of 25+ cm and re-scaled LRP (Figure 2).

Evaluation of Assessment Triggers

A stock status indicator based on the annual RV survey will be updated at the halfway point in the 5-year stock assessment cycle. The RV indicator for an interim update would be the 3-year average trawlable RV biomass for adult Yellowtail Flounder (25+ cm). A full stock assessment would be triggered during the interim update if the stock is above the RV LRP-proxy.

At least 6 to 12 months lead time is required before a new stock assessment for analyses of other indicators and biological sampling needed for the interpretation of the population trajectory.

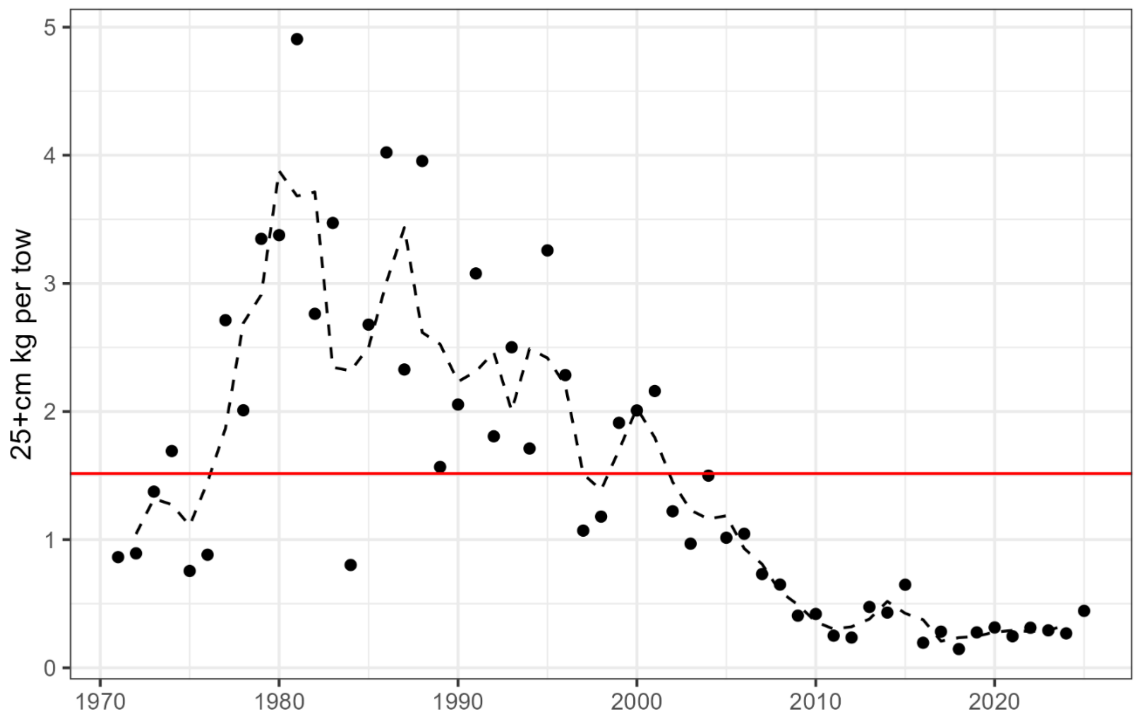

Figure 2. RV survey catch rates (points) and 3 year moving average (dashed line) of large Yellowtail Flounder (25+ cm; kg per tow) and re-scaled LRP (red line).

BYCATCH

The Yellowtail Flounder fishery has consistently caught substantial quantities of both Winter Flounder and Windowpane Flounder around the Magdalen Islands, with the combined weight of these other flounder species exceeding Yellowtail Flounder since 2007. Winter Flounder has been below its LRP since 2006, and the strong spatial overlap between the two species means that high Winter Flounder bycatch would be expected if a Yellowtail Flounder fishery were resumed. Given that both stocks are currently in the Critical Zone and their trajectories are closely linked, science advice for Yellowtail Flounder should therefore be considered in parallel with the status of Winter Flounder, particularly when evaluating scenarios relevant to rebuilding progress for either stock.

OTHER MANAGEMENT QUESTIONS

Additional measurable objectives for the rebuilding plan

The age and size structure of Yellowtail Flounder has become truncated throughout the time series, where older fish (ages 7+) in the RV survey were consistently observed in the 1980s and made up 60% of the catch, they became far less common after 1990. Since 2020, these older fish represent only 0.05% of the catch. The loss of older and larger individuals can negatively impact reproductive success. Consequently, along with the additional measurable objective highlighted in the Bycatch section, an objective to increase the proportion of Yellowtail aged 7+ to averages observed in the 1980s (60%) could be included in the rebuilding plan.

How and when to track rebuilding

Rebuilding progress will be monitored using the NAFO 4T Yellowtail Flounder stock assessment model and through continued tracking of key productivity parameters, including natural mortality, recruitment, maturity, and growth. Projections and decision tables generated from the assessment will support evaluation of progress toward rebuilding objectives. Rebuilding progress should be reviewed as part of the established five-year multi-year assessment cycle, with an interim update at the halfway point between full assessments.

The rebuilding plan should be revisited on the same five-year cycle, with the interim update providing early signals of changes in stock status; rebuilding objectives and assessment models should be updated if stock productivity or other external factors influencing stock dynamics change.

SOURCES OF UNCERTAINTY

As with any stock assessment, there are inherent sources of uncertainty associated with data inputs, model structure, and underlying biological assumptions. While these uncertainties exist, most are minor when evaluated against the strong and internally consistent trends observed across data sources. The dominant patterns in the RV survey and fishery data remain clear and robust, providing a high degree of confidence in the overall conclusions of this work on stock status.

Uncertainties that are unlikely to change the conclusions regarding stock status, its trajectory, or drivers include:

1. the limited amount of landings and associated fishery catch samples since the closure of the fishery provide little information on stock dynamics;
2. challenges ageing otoliths persist despite quality-assurance measures; decadal ALKs reduce but do not eliminate uncertainty;
3. non-stationary productivity (growth, maturation, M) precludes using equilibrium reference points and necessitates proxy B_{MSY} from a historical productive period;
4. the RV survey age composition requiring selectivity time blocks suggests the length based conversion factors or age length keys need further adjustments;
5. the difficulty in estimating the population scale and survey catchability (q), which is based on a prior; however, the uncertainty in population scale would not alter the perception of stock status, and
6. local dynamics (Magdalen Islands) may diverge from stock-wide averages.

Finally, the advice on the number of years to be at or above the rebuilding target and number of years to display positive stock trajectory in population projections under harvest cannot be quantified. As the current stock production and trajectory are not increasing, estimating the number of years that would minimize the likelihood of the stock returning to the Critical Zone after rebuilding is not feasible. If the stock was to approach the target, the number of years and conditions of stock trajectory to be considered rebuilt should be re-evaluated.

LIST OF MEETING PARTICIPANTS

Name	Affiliation
Akia, Sosthene	DFO Science, Gulf Region
Arseneau, Alain	Fish harvester
Arseneau, Cédric	DFO Area Office, Quebec Region
Barrett, Melanie	DFO Science, Maritimes Region
Beaudry-Sylvestre, Manuelle	DFO Science, Quebec Region
Cakmak, Ezgi	DFO Licencing, Quebec Region
Cormier, Julien	DFO Fisheries Management, Gulf Region
Hubley, Brad	DFO Science, Maritimes Region
Labbé-Giguère, Stéphanie	DFO Fisheries Management, Quebec Region
McDermid, Jenni	DFO Science, Gulf Region
Ouellette-Plante, Jordan	DFO Science, Quebec Region
Ratelle, Stephanie	DFO Science, Gulf Region
Ricard, Daniel	DFO Science, Gulf Region
Robertson, Matthew	Memorial University of Newfoundland
Rondeau, Amélie	DFO Science, Gulf Region
Roy, Mélanie	DFO Science, Gulf Region
Sutton, Jolene	DFO Science, Gulf Region
Sylvain, François-Étienne	DFO Science, Gulf Region
Trottier, Steve	DFO Fisheries Management, Quebec Region
Turbide, Réjean	Fish harvester
Turcotte, François	DFO Science, Gulf Region

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P.O. Box 5030
Moncton, NB E1C 9B6

E-Mail: DFO.GLFCSA-CASGLF.MPO@dfo-mpo.gc.ca
Internet address: www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/csas-sccs/

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