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Maritimes Region

Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat
Science Advisory Report 2026/024

MARITIMES REGION SNOW CRAB (*CHIONOECETES OPILIO*) STOCK ASSESSMENT IN 2025

CONTEXT

The Maritimes Region Resource Management sector has requested detailed advice on the status of Snow Crab (*Chionoecetes opilio*, O. Fabricius) stocks on the Scotian Shelf to inform recommendations for management decisions for the upcoming fishing season in North-Eastern Nova Scotia (N-ENS; formerly crab fishing areas [CFA] 20–22), South-Eastern Nova Scotia (S-ENS; CFA 23 and CFA 24), and Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) Division 4X (CFA 24W).

This Fisheries Science Advisory Report is from the regional peer review meeting of February 18, 2026, and February 26, 2026, on Stock Assessment for Snow Crab in the Maritimes Region. 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

- In N-ENS, the modelled fishable biomass of Snow Crab in 2025 was 1.13 kt placing this component of the stock in the critical zone with a probability of 0.72.
- In S-ENS, the modelled fishable biomass of Snow Crab in 2025 was 43.05 kt placing this component of the stock in the healthy zone with a probability of 0.91.
- In 4X, the modelled fishable biomass of Snow Crab for the 2025–2026 season was 0.41 kt, placing this component of the stock near the LRP (0.4 kt) with a probability of 0.51 of being in the cautious zone and a probability of 0.47 of being in the critical zone.

Trends

- In N-ENS, modelled fishable biomass has continued to decline since 2022. Modelled fishable biomass has increased in S-ENS for the first time since 2021, and in 4X for the first time since 2020.
- The trend in fishing mortality (exploitation rate) shows a decrease in N-ENS since 2024, and since 2023 in S-ENS. In 4X, the trend in fishing mortality shows a continued decrease since a peak in 2021 (fishing season ongoing at time of assessment).
- Recruitment to the fishable component, that is, the male component of the population, has been declining in N-ENS since 2019, steady over the past ten years in S-ENS, and has shown a decrease in 4X since 2019.

Ecosystem and Climate Change Considerations

- Bottom temperatures have reverted to historically cold conditions over the last three years (2023 to 2025) following many years of high and variable conditions and a peak in 2022 across all areas.
- Viable habitat for Snow Crab is highest in S-ENS. Even though temperatures have improved in N-ENS since 2022 (Figure 7), overall habitat viability has declined in N-ENS (Figure 7). 4X shows a slight improvement; however, the overall trend has been downwards since 2010. Previous habitat space seems to have been overtaken by competitors and predators in 4X.

Stock Advice

- Based on harvest control rules as presented in the Maritimes Snow Crab Integrated Fisheries Management Plan (DFO 2013), the strategies for exploitation rates for the three management areas are as follows:
  - N-ENS: consideration of fishery closure
  - S-ENS: 10–30% of fishable biomass
  - 4X: as the modelled fishable biomass (0.41 kt) places this component of the stock near the LRP (0.4 kt), with a probability of 0.51 of being in the cautious and a probability of 0.47 of being in the critical zone**,** strategies for consideration for a stock in the critical zone (fishery closure) and the cautious zone (0–20% of fishable biomass) are appropriate.

BASIS FOR ASSESSMENT

Assessment Details

Year Assessment Approach was Approved

2012-fishery model (Choi and Zisserson 2012)

2020-index model (Choi 2023)

Assessment Type

Full Assessment

Most Recent Assessment Date

1. Last Full Assessment: February 2025 (DFO 2025 and Choi et al. 2025)
2. Last Interim-Year Update: February 2022 (DFO 2022)

Stock Assessment Approach

1. Broad category: single stock assessment model
2. Specific category: biomass dynamics, state-space, surplus production

Stock Structure Assumption

Three main crab fishing areas (N-ENS, S-ENS, 4X) are treated independently as environmental variability in each area is sufficiently different and length scale of movement of benthic components are small enough to ignore immigration/emigration between each area (Choi 2023).

Reference Points

- Limit Reference Point (LRP): 25% of estimated carrying capacity, Choi (2023).
- Upper Stock Reference (USR): 50% of estimated carrying capacity, Choi (2023).
- Removal Reference (RR): F_{MSY}=r/2, Choi (2023).

Table 1 shows the LRP, USR, and RR for 2025 for N-ENS, S-ENS, and 4X.

Table 1. Reference points (LRP-limit referent point, USR-upper stock reference, RR-removal reference (HR-harvest rate)) for 2025 for north-eastern Nova Scotia (N-ENS), south-eastern Nova Scotia (S-ENS), and 4X fishing areas.

Management Area	LRP (kt)	USR (kt)	RR (HR)
N-ENS	1.3	2.6	0.37 (31%)
S-ENS	18.3	36.5	0.30 (26%)
4X	0.4	0.8	0.29 (25%)

Harvest Control Rules

The harvest control rules (HCR) for Maritimes Snow Crab, as documented in the Maritimes Snow Crab Integrated Fisheries Management Plan (DFO 2013), have operational target exploitation rates that vary as a function of the stock status against the reference points. When the stock is in the healthy zone, above the USR, a target exploitation rate would fall between 10% to 30% of the fishable biomass. In the cautious zone, below the USR and above the LRP, the target exploitation rate would be between 0% to 20% of the fishable biomass. When the stock status falls below the LRP, placing the stock in the critical zone, closure of the fishery is considered. Other biological and ecosystem considerations such as recruitment, spawning stock (female) biomass, size structure, sex ratios, and environmental and ecosystem conditions, provide additional guidance and context within each range.

Data

- Survey data: Industry-DFO, fishery-independent annual Maritimes Region Snow Crab Trawl Survey (Zisserson 2015) 1996–2025. All 367 planned survey stations were completed in 2025.
- Data sources for temperature, predator/prey data: Maritimes Region Snow Crab Trawl Survey, Maritimes Region Ecosystem Research Vessel surveys; Atlantic Zonal Monitoring Program Survey, inshore and offshore scallop surveys, Inshore Lobster Trawl Survey, Eastern Scotian Shelf Shrimp Survey.
- Fishery landings data: Maritimes Region fisheries information system database (MARFIS) 1999–2025. Note the 2025–2026 fishing season in 4X (CFA 24W) was ongoing at the time of the assessment. Data was accessed on January 23rd 2026.
- Observer data: 2004–2025. Monitoring levels for at-sea observers (5% for N-ENS and S-ENS; 10% for 4X) have not been met since 2019. There has been no observer coverage in 4X since 2020 when it reached a level of 2.6%. The low coverage in all areas in 2025 does not allow for reliable estimates in recent bycatch trends.

ASSESSMENT

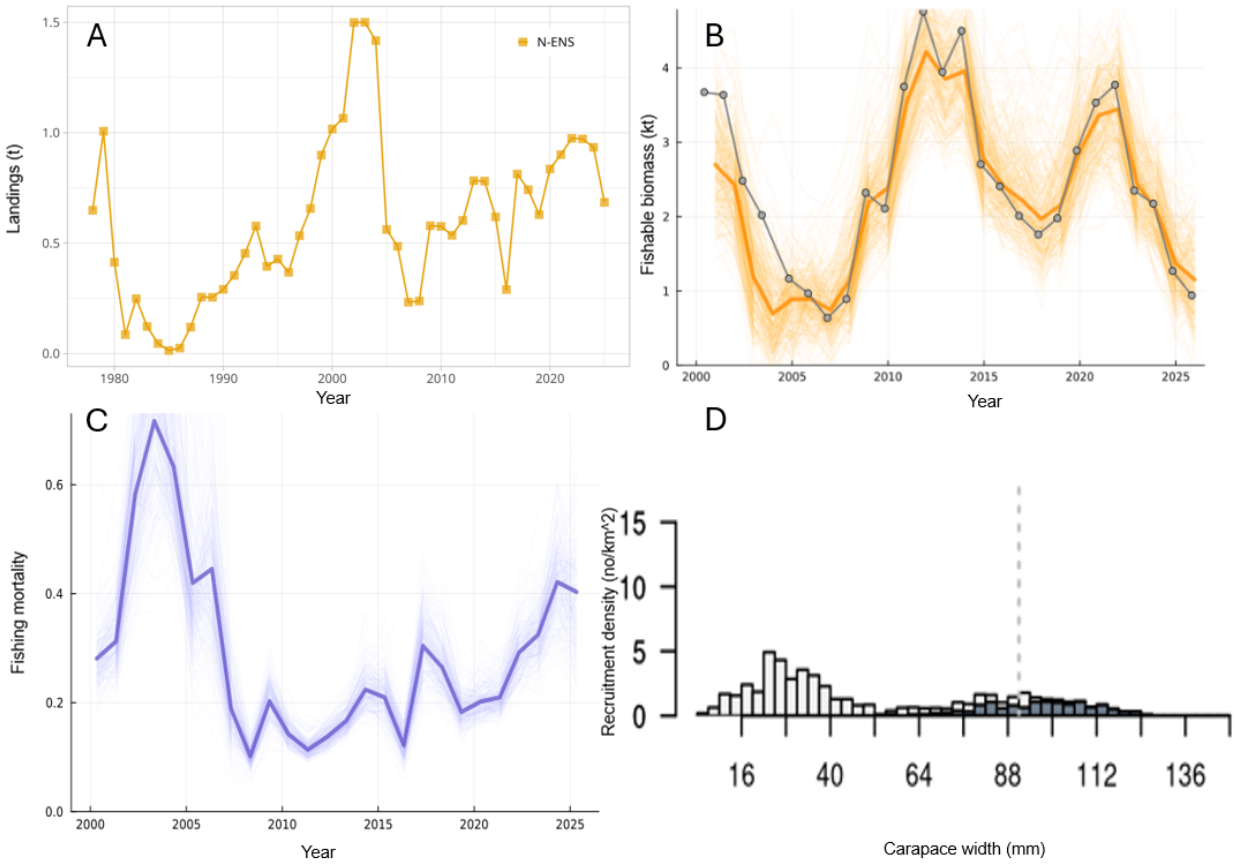

Figure 1. For N-ENS in 2025: (A) Catch (t), (B) Fishable biomass (kt,) with posterior mean (dark) and samples (light) in orange and dots indicating Maritimes Region Snow Crab Trawl Survey index (post-fishery), (C) Fishing mortality (exploitation rate) with posterior mean (dark) and samples (light), (D) Recruitment (numerical density (no./km^2) vs. carapace width (mm)) for immature (light bars) and mature (dark bars) male crab.

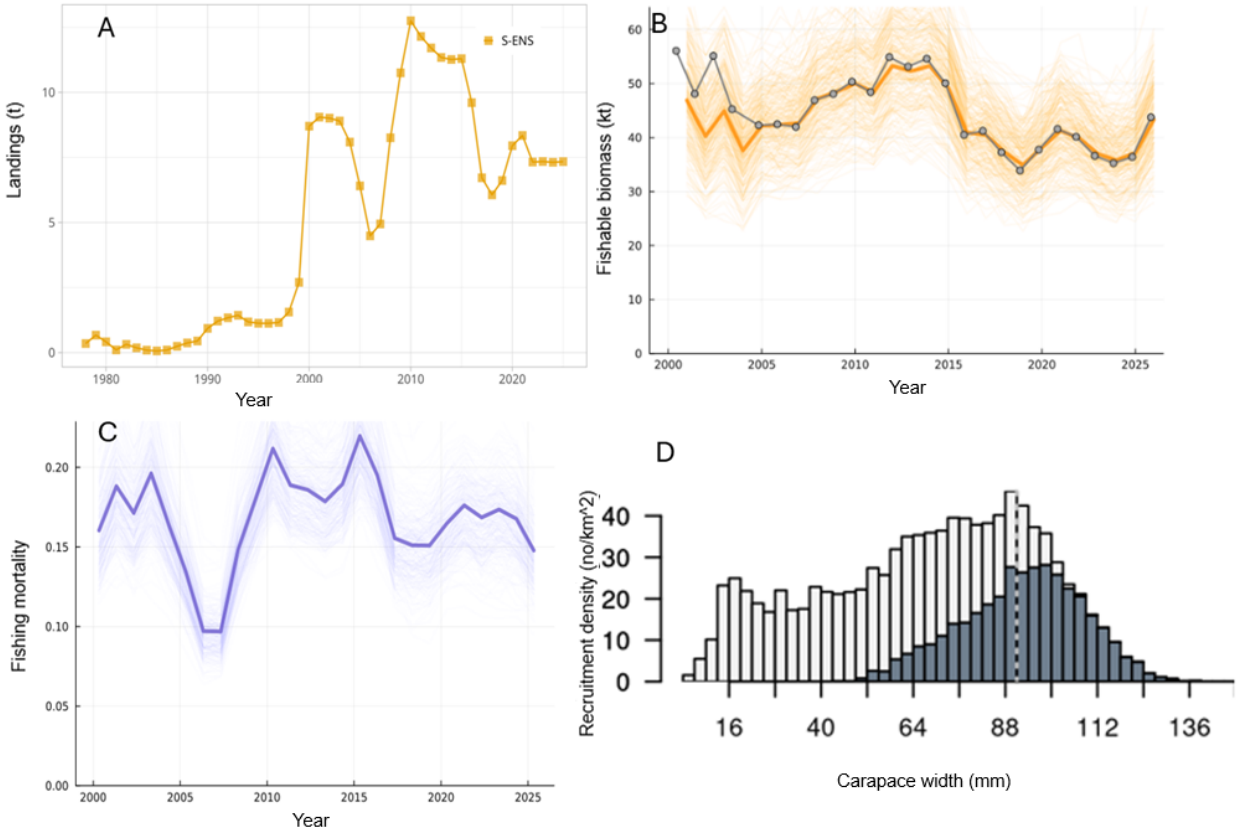

Figure 2. For S-ENS in 2025: (A) Catch (t), (B) Fishable biomass (kt) with posterior mean (dark) and samples (light) in orange and dots indicating Maritimes Region Snow Crab Trawl Survey index (post-fishery), (C) Fishing mortality (exploitation rate) with posterior mean (dark) and samples (light), (D) Recruitment (numerical density (no./km^2) vs. carapace width (mm)) for immature (light bars) and mature (dark bars) male crab.

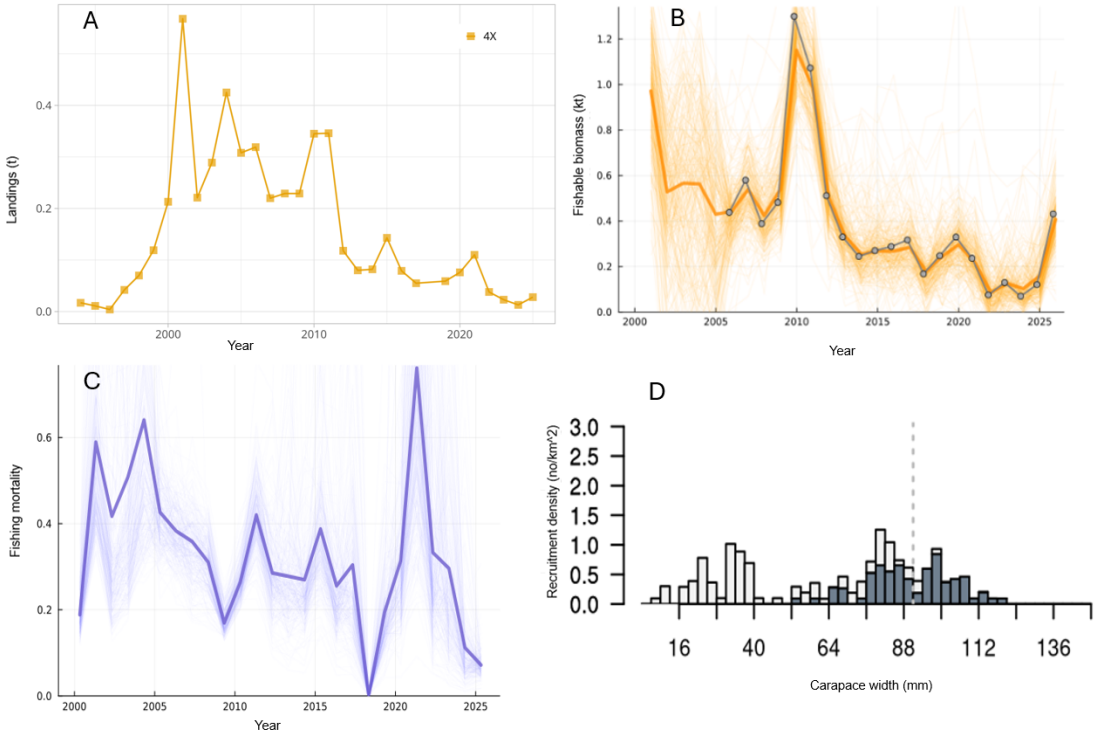

*Figure 3. For 4X in 2025 (*note the fishery is ongoing at time of assessment): (A) Catch (t), (B) Fishable biomass (kt) with posterior mean (dark) and samples (light) in orange and dots indicating Maritimes Region Snow Crab Trawl Survey index (post-fishery), (C) Fishing mortality (exploitation rate) with posterior mean (dark) and samples (light), (D) Recruitment (numerical density (no./km^2) vs. carapace width (mm)) for immature (light bars) and mature (dark bars) male crab.*

Stock Status and Trends

Modelled Fishable Biomass

In N-ENS, the modelled fishable biomass of Snow Crab in 2025 was 1.13 kt, relative to 1.36 t in the previous year (Figure 1B). In S-ENS, the 2025 modelled biomass was 43.05 kt, relative to 36.98 kt in the previous year (Figure 2B). In 4X, the modelled biomass for the 2025-2026 season was 0.41 t, relative to 0.16 t in the previous season (Figure 3B).

There has been a continued decrease in modelled biomass in N-ENS since 2022. Modelled biomass has increased in S-ENS for the first time since 2021, and in 4X for the first time since 2020 (Figures 1B-3B).

Fishing Mortality

In N-ENS, the 2025 fishing mortality is estimated to have been 0.54 (annual exploitation rate of 38.3%), down from 0.559 (annual exploitation rate of 36.6%; Figure 1C) in the previous year.

In S-ENS, the 2025 fishing mortality is estimated to have been 0.16 (annual exploitation rate of 11.9%), while in the previous year it was 0.184 (annual exploitation rate of 13.5%; Figure 2C). Localized exploitation rates are likely higher, as not all areas for which biomass is estimated are fished (e.g., continental slope areas and western, inshore areas of CFA 24).

In 4X, the 2025–2026 season (ongoing) fishing mortality is currently estimated to be 0.076 (annual exploitation rate of 8.1%), while in the previous season it was 0.127 (annual exploitation

rate of 16.5%; Figure 3C). Localized exploitation rates are likely higher, as not all areas for which biomass is estimated are fished.

Recruitment

The trend in male recruitment (Figure 4), represented as a numerical density for juveniles and mature males, has been declining in N-ENS since 2019. In S-ENS the trend for male recruitment has been stable over the last ten years. In 4X, the male recruitment trend has been variable over the last ten years but there has been a decrease in numerical density in both immature and mature males since 2019.

In N-ENS there is little to no recruitment for the upcoming 1-4 years, with the potential for a small pulse of recruitment (20-35 mm CW) in 5-6 years (Figure 1D). In S-ENS, a stable size structure exists; continued recruitment is expected for the upcoming years (especially in the next 1-2 years) (Figure 2D). In 4X, erratic inter-annual patterns of growth stages are evident with minimal to low recruitment expected, although in 2025 we observed more males in the 16-40 mm CW range than in 2024 (Figure 3D).

The recruitment for the female component of the population into the mature (egg-bearing) stage has been decreasing in N-ENS and increasing in S-ENS and 4X (Figure 5). Across all areas we are seeing increased numbers of small (15–40 mm CW range) immature females compared to previous years (Figure 5). Note that females are not exploited, and as such, the reduction in N-ENS may be due to elevated mortality caused by predation and habitat loss.

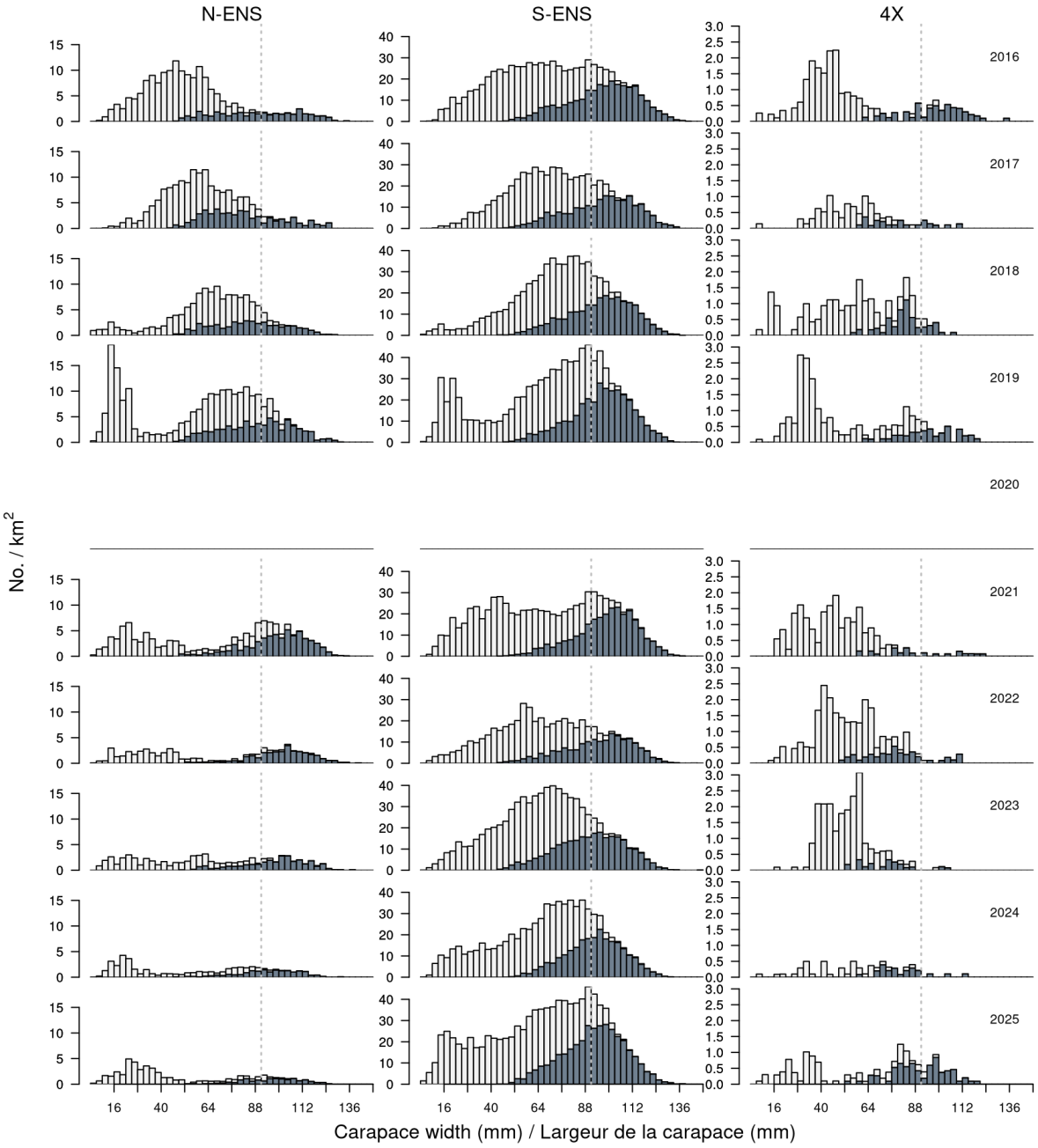

Figure 4. Size-frequency (geometric mean areal density, No./km^2) histograms of carapace width of male Snow Crab from the snow crab survey by year. The vertical line represents the legal size (95 mm). Immature animals are shown with lighter bars and mature with darker. The year 2020 is left blank as there was no survey.

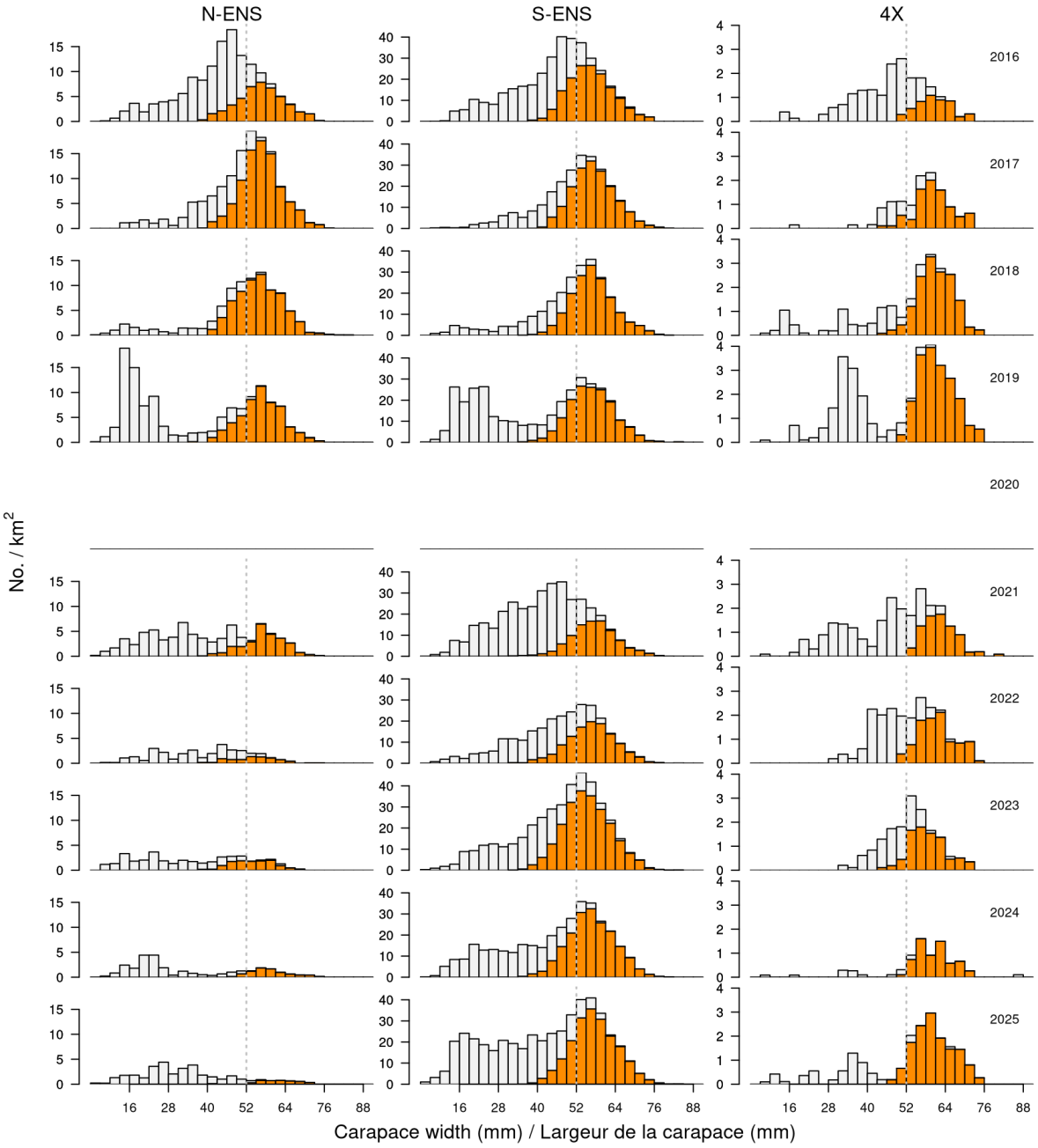

Figure 5. Size-frequency (geometric mean areal density, No./km^2) histograms of carapace width of female Snow Crab from the Snow Crab survey by year. Immature animals are shown with lighter bars and mature with darker. The year 2020 is left blank as there was no survey. Dotted vertical line is the approximate carapace width of female crab of instar 9, the size at which females begin to molt to maturity.

Current Status

North-Eastern Nova Scotia

In N-ENS, recruitment has been low since 2022 (Figure 4). Total mortality exceeded recruitment in 2025. Modelled fishable biomass in 2025 was 1.13 kt placing the stock in the critical zone with a probability of 0.72.

South-Eastern Nova Scotia

In S-ENS, recruitment to the fishery continues at a sustainable rate for the upcoming season matching total mortality. Modelled fishable biomass in 2025 was 43.05 kt placing the stock in the healthy zone with a probability greater than 0.91.

Area 4X

In 4X, low recruitment is expected to continue for the next three years. Total mortality is now in approximate balance with recruitment. The modelled fishable biomass in 4X (fishery ongoing) for the 2025–2026 season was 0.41 kt, placing the stock near the LRP (0.4 kt) with a probability of 0.51 of being in the cautious zone and a probability of 0.47 of being in the critical zone.

History of Total Allowable Catches, Landings, and Effort

Fishing effort in 2025 was 10,500, 69,700 and 500 trap hauls in N-ENS, S-ENS, and 4X, respectively. Relative to the previous year, this represents a decrease of 8% in N-ENS and 11% in S-ENS, and an increase of 67% in 4X (Tables 2–4). In 2025, the 4X area TAC was divided into a 30 t allocation for the eastern zone (4XE), near the 4X–CFA 24 boundary, and a 50 t allocation for the western zone (4XW), near Roseway Basin (see Christie et al., in press). Note that landings are not reported for the 4XW area as the fishery is ongoing at the time of assessment.

TACs for 2025 were 697 t, 7,345 t, and 80 t, for N-ENS, S-ENS, and 4X, respectively. Landings in 2025 were 685 t, 7,338 t, and 28 t in N-ENS, S-ENS, and 4X (season ongoing), respectively. Relative to previous year landings, this represents a decline of 27% in N-ENS, and an increase of 0.3% in S-ENS and 115% in 4X (Tables 2–4). As with effort, landings were spatially dispersed in most areas with the exception of 4X to date.

Non-standardized fishery catch rates in 2025 were 65, 105, and 52 kg/trap haul in N-ENS, S-ENS, and 4X (season ongoing), respectively. Relative to the previous year, they represent a decrease of 20.7% in N-ENS, an increase of 8.76% in S-ENS and 36.8% in 4X (season ongoing) relative to the previous year (Tables 2–4). Declines in catch rates were notable in the inshore areas of N-ENS.

Table 2. Fishery performance statistics in north-eastern Nova Scotia (N-ENS). Units are: total allowable catch (TAC) and landings (tons, t), effort (x10^3 trap hauls) and catch per unit effort (CPUE) (kg/trap haul).

Year	Licenses	TAC (t)	Landings (t)	Effort (1000 h)	CPUE (kg/h)
2015	78	624	619	6.2	100
2016	78	286	290	2.7	109
2017	78	825	813	8.8	93
2018	78	784	742	12.2	61
2019	78	627	629	7.5	84
2020	78	847	836	7.7	108
2021	78	901	901	8.8	102

Year	Licenses	TAC (t)	Landings (t)	Effort (1000 h)	CPUE (kg/h)
2022	78	980	975	8.6	113
2023	78	981	972	9.5	103
2024	78	938	934	11.4	82
2025	78	697	685	10.5	65

Table 3. *Fishery performance statistics in south-eastern Nova Scotia (S-ENS). Units are: total allowable catch (TAC) and landings (tons, t), effort (x10^3 trap hauls) and catch per unit effort (CPUE) (kg/trap haul).*

Year	Licenses	TAC (t)	Landings (t)	Effort (1000 h)	CPUE (kg/h)
2015	115	11311	11295	103.9	109
2016	115	9614	9606	87.3	110
2017	115	6730	6718	69.9	96
2018	115	6057	6063	51.3	118
2019	115	6663	6612	61.7	107
2020	115	8161	7951	63.8	125
2021	115	8379	8343	80.9	103
2022	115	7345	7323	56.5	130
2023	115	7345	7342	62.1	118
2024	115	7345	7314	78.6	93
2025	115	7345	7338	69.7	105

Table 4. Fishery performance statistics in 4X, season ongoing. Units are: total allowable catch (TAC) and landings (tons, t), Effort (x10^3 trap hauls) and catch per unit effort (CPUE) (kg/trap haul). Data accessed on January 23, 2026. Note the TAC was split into two areas for 2025-26 which is represented by 4XE and 4XW.

Year	Licenses	TAC (t)	Landings (t)	Effort (1000 h)	CPUE (kg/h)
2015/16	9	150	143	4.4	32
2016/17	9	80	79	2.9	27
2017/18	9	110	55	4.4	13
2018/19	9	0	0	-	-
2019/20	9	55	59	1.1	51
2020/21	9	80	76	1.6	49
2021/22	9	110	110	3.1	36
2022/23	9	125	38	2.3	17
2023/24	9	55	23	1.0	22
2024/25	9	20	13	0.3	38
2025/26 4XE	9	30	28	0.5	52
2025/26 4XW	9	50	-	-	-

Ecosystem and Climate Change Considerations

Being at the southern-most range of the distribution of Snow Crab in the northwest Atlantic, climate variability and ecosystem change is a concern. Such factors are incorporated into this assessment, but crudely at best.

Bottom temperatures have reverted to historically cold conditions over the last three years (2023–2025; around 5 degrees, Figure 6) following many years of high and variable conditions. Viable habitat is modelled from several habitat, environmental, and biological variables on the SSE (e.g., substrate, temperature, co-occurring species, etc. Choi 2023). Viable habitat for Snow Crab is highest in S-ENS. Even though temperatures have improved in N-ENS since 2022 (Figure 7), overall habitat viability has declined in N-ENS (Figure 7). 4X shows a slight improvement; however, the overall trend has been downwards since 2010. Even with decreasing bottom temperatures in 2025, previous habitat space seems to have been overtaken by competitors and predators in 4X. Favourable habitats in 2025 were found in the inner trench and Glace Bay Hole of N-ENS, north of Sable Island and south of Misaine Bank in S-ENS, and south of Sambro and Lunenburg in 4X (Christie et al., in press).

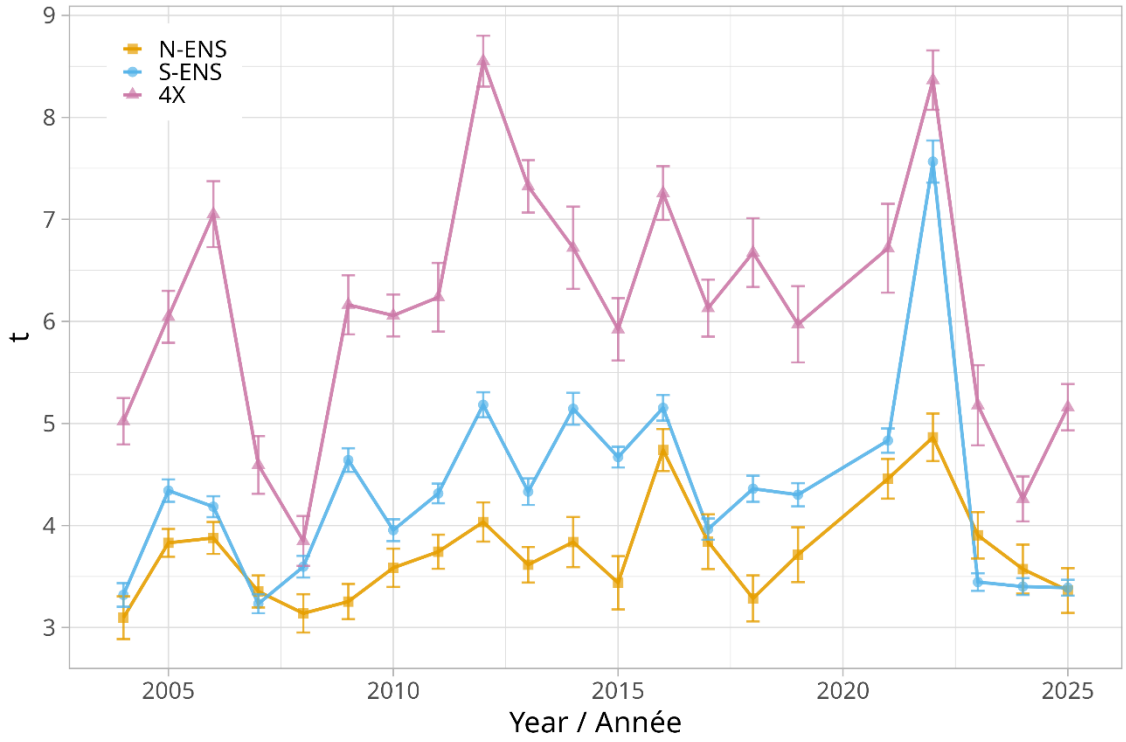

Figure 6. Annual variations in average bottom temperature (t) observed during the Snow Crab survey. Error bars represent standard errors. N-ENS- North-Eastern Nova Scotia (yellow), S-ENS- South-Eastern Nova Scotia (blue), and 4X (pink) refer to snow crab fishery areas. Points indicate the means and bars are the 95% credible intervals.

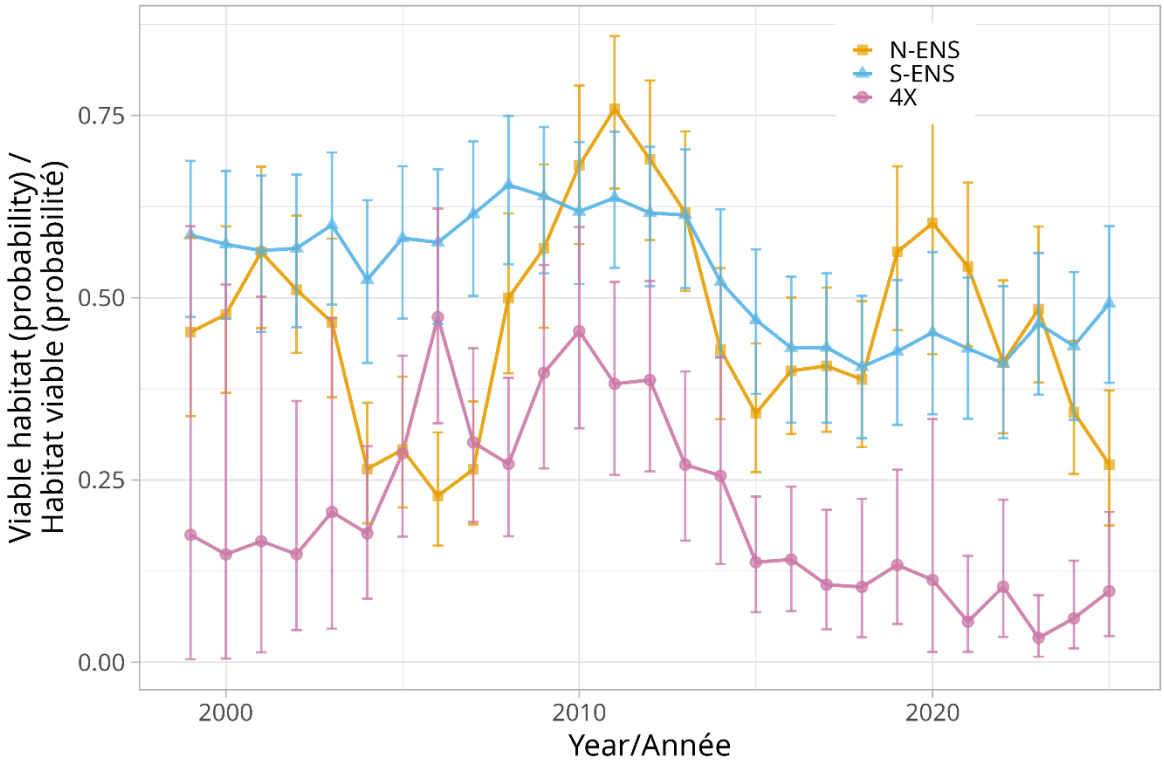

Figure 7. Habitat viability (probability; fishable Snow Crab). Means and 95% credible intervals are presented.

Stock Advice-Harvest Decision Rule

Based on the stock status of Snow Crab in each of the management areas, the harvest control rules documented in the Maritimes Snow Crab Integrated Fisheries Management Plan (DFO 2013) suggest the following exploitation strategies for the 2026 fishing year for N-ENS and S-ENS, and the 2026–27 fishing year for 4X (see also Figure 8):

- N-ENS: consideration of fishery closure
- S-ENS: 10–30% of fishable biomass
- 4X: as the modelled fishable biomass (0.41 kt) places this component of the stock near the LRP (0.4 kt), with a probability of 0.51 of being in the cautious and a probability of 0.47 of being in the critical zone, strategies for consideration for a stock in the critical zone (fishery closure) and the cautious zone (0–20% of fishable biomass) are appropriate.

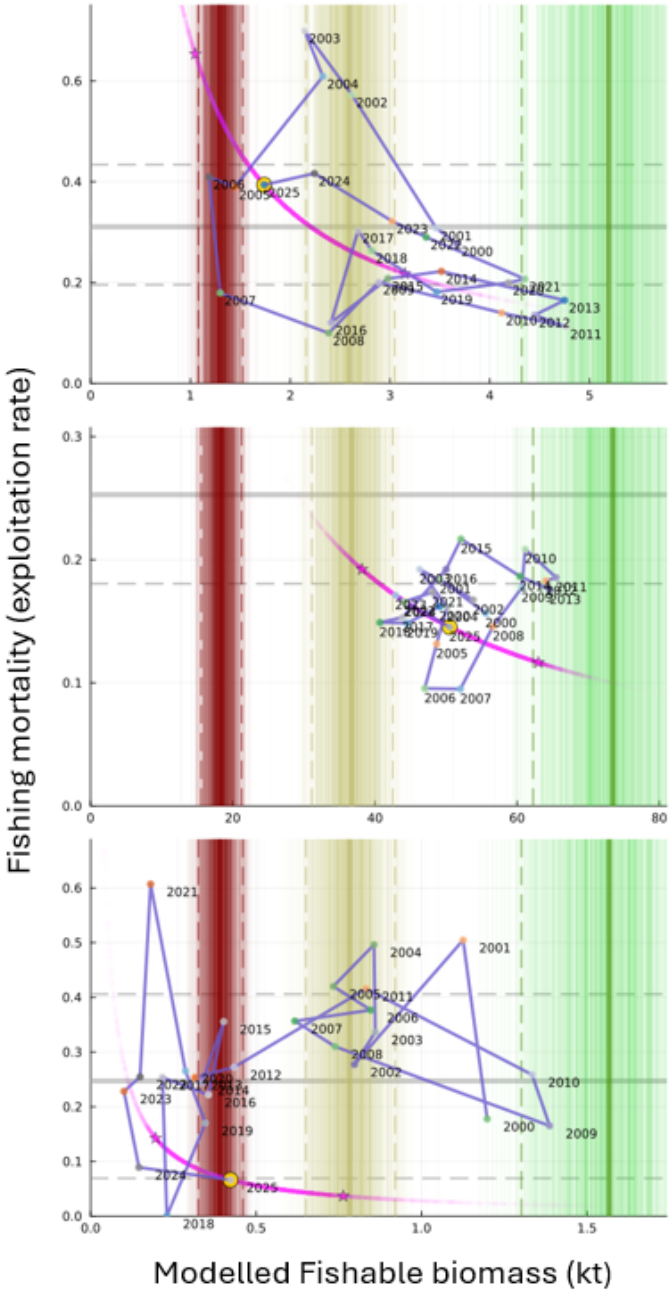

Figure 8. Fishing mortality (exploitation rate) vs modelled biomass (kt) from 2001–2025 for North-Eastern Nova Scotia (N-ENS), South-Eastern Nova Scotia (S-ENS), and 4X. The 2025 modelled fishable biomass (yellow dot) and associated 95% credible intervals (pink stars) identify current stock status. The variability associated with fishable biomass and fishing mortality estimates are shown as pink lines (with 95% credible intervals shown with stars). The grey solid horizontal line identifies the removal reference (FMSY) estimated for each area and the stippled horizontal lines identify the 95% credible intervals. The red and yellow solid coloured vertical lines identify the estimates of the limit reference point (LRP) and the upper stock reference (USR), respectively. The green solid line represents the carrying capacity (K) for each region. The dashed lines delimit the 95% credible intervals for the correspondingly coloured reference lines. The lighter coloured vertical lines represent the variability associated with each parameter. For fishing area 4X, the year refers to the starting year of the fishing season; the fishery is ongoing.

BYCATCH

The 2025 bycatch estimates are detailed in Christie et al. (in press). On average, the bycatch in N-ENS and S-ENS was 0.03% and 0.58% of landings (average from 2004-2025), respectively. In CFA 4X, there is no current data (no observer coverage since 2020), but historically, they have been on average, 8.3% of landings (average from 2004-2020). The bycatch in this fishery are primarily other Crustacea (crab and lobster). Historical bycatch estimates have been low in all areas; however, low at-sea observer coverage in these areas in 2025 does not permit a reliable estimate of recent bycatch trends.

SOURCES OF UNCERTAINTY

Sources of uncertainty associated with the reference points and the underlying biological models were identified during previous assessments for these stocks and continue to persist (Choi 2023 and Christie et al., in press).

Capture and handling of soft-shell Snow Crab is a concern. There is uncertainty related to the survival of these Snow Crab when returned to the water. Neglect in prompt and careful return of soft crab to the water can injure or kill the crabs that would be entering into the fishable component in the future. This unaccounted-for potential mortality would result in an underestimate of fishing mortality and impact the biomass.

Illegal and unreported Snow Crab removals have the potential to impact the biomass and the estimation of reference points.

Recruitment strength into the fishable component is tracked in the assessment, but its contribution to the fishable biomass in the subsequent fishing season is unknown. Factors influencing this include the interplay of temperature, movement, and predation.

Assessment relies on an assumption of even distribution of effort. Localized overharvesting can cause excess handling and soft-shell mortality and larger scale spatial replacement due to predation, replacement, competitive exclusion. These factors can bias fishery model estimates and associated reference points and stock status.

While these uncertainties and data gaps have been identified, it is unlikely that they impact the current stock status as survey captures all forms of mortality.

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