UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Northeast Fisheries Science Center
166 Water Street
Woods Hole, MA 02543-1026

August 1, 2014

Mr. E. F. Stockwell, III
Chairman, New England Fishery Management Council
50 Water Street; Mill 2
Newburyport, MA 01950

Dear Terry:

We are writing to inform you that the Northeast Fisheries Science Center has completed an update of the Gulf of Maine cod stock assessment, and requests the Council's assistance in completing a peer review of this work.

First, some background on what led us to conduct the update. We have received numerous requests from the councils and industry over the years to provide more timely information on stock condition and to provide advance notice when we see early indications of changes in stock condition. As a result, the Northeast Fisheries Science Center has been developing ways to streamline the process for assessment updates. The intent of the effort is to develop a mechanism to alert managers to new signals observed in survey, catch, or other data collected between full assessments.

Upon examining the most recent survey data for Gulf of Maine cod, all major indicators of stock health appear to have deteriorated since the 2012 assessment. Given the information on Gulf of Maine cod and the availability of catch and age data for 2012 and 2013, we chose to do an updated assessment for Gulf of Maine cod.

Specifically, this assessment was selected for our trial because (1) we noted that all three survey indices (NEFSC spring survey; NEFSC fall survey; and Massachusetts DMF spring survey) in recent years declined to record low levels; (2) age data, survey indices, and prorated catch were all up to date through 2013 and available for use; (3) because of the recently conducted benchmark assessments for this stock, the data processing routines necessary to prepare data for use in assessments were in a high state of readiness; and (4) it is relatively complex, with two assessment models. If the new approach could be successfully used to produce a concise and timely update for this stock, then it would be easier to use for less complex assessments.

In conducting the update, it became apparent that virtually all indicators of Gulf of Maine cod stock condition have deteriorated since 2012 when the last assessment was conducted, and

prospects for improvement as well as rebuilding are dimming:

- Spawning biomass levels are estimated to be at 3 to 4 percent of the biomass target for maximum sustainable yield.
- Fishery resource survey indices and spawning stock biomass are at all-time lows.

The intent of undertaking this assessment update was part of a larger effort to develop a more efficient process for generating information on stock status. However, once the preliminary results of the assessment update became clear, we felt it was important to share what we have learned given the apparent grave condition of this stock.

We are requesting the Council's assistance to conduct a peer review of the stock assessment update with the participation by its Scientific and Statistical Committee. We discussed some peer review options with the Council Executive Director and hope you can soon finalize a plan for the peer review. Our staff stands ready to work collaboratively with you to accomplish the peer review, so that updated assessment results can be used to inform management decisions.

Sincerely,

Russell W. Brown

Russell W. Brown, Ph.D.
Acting Science and Research Director

cc: R. Beal
J. Bullard
C. Moore