



Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Monitoring Committee Webinar Meeting Summary August 1, 2024

Monitoring Committee Attendees: Tracey Bauer (ASMFC), Julia Beaty (MAFMC), Peter Clarke (NJ F&W), Kiley Dancy (MAFMC), Lorena de la Garza (NC DMF), Steve Doctor (MD DNR), Alexa Galvan (VMRC), Hannah Hart (MAFMC), Emily Keiley (GARFO), Elise Koob (MA DMF), Mike Schmidtke (SAFMC), Rachel Sysak (NY DEC), Corinne Truesdale (RI DEM), Sam Truesdell (NEFSC), Chelsea Tuohy (ASMFC), Ben Wasserman (DNREC), Greg Wojcik (CT DEP)

Additional Attendees: Chris Batsavage, Joe Cimino, Greg DiDomenico, Michelle Duval, James Fletcher, Jeff Kaelin, Emily Liljestrand, Nichola Meserve, Adam Nowalsky, Eric Reid, Brendan Runde, Mike Waine, Renee Zobel

The Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Monitoring Committee (MC) met via webinar on Thursday, August 1, 2024, to discuss several topics. The MC reviewed data updates (for summer flounder and scup) and management track stock assessment information (for black sea bass), as well as recent fishery performance and management recommendations from the Advisory Panel, the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), and Council staff. The MC reviewed previously adopted 2025 commercial and recreational Annual Catch Limits (ACLs), Annual Catch Targets (ACTs), commercial quotas, and recreational harvest limits (RHLs) for summer flounder and scup, and recommended 2025 limits for black sea bass. In addition, they reviewed commercial management measures for all three species.

Briefing materials considered by the MC are available at: <https://www.mafmc.org/council-events/2024/sfsbsb-mon-com>

Additional comments and recommendations for black sea bass provided by the MC members from Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Maryland after the meeting are appended to this meeting summary.

Summer Flounder 2025 Specifications Review

The MC agreed with the staff recommendations for no changes to the 2025 ACLs, ACTs, and landings limits for summer flounder (Table 1), given that there is no information to suggest a change is warranted. The MC did not make any additions or adjustments to their previously adopted rationale for 2024-2025 limits.¹ One MC member suggested a deeper dive into sector-specific dead discard projections during the next round of multi-year specifications development, to investigate the trend of overestimating dead discards in recent years.

¹ See summary of previous rationale in the July 2023 MC summary: <https://www.mafmc.org/s/SFSBSB-MC-Mtg-Summary-27July2023.pdf>.

The MC also agreed with the staff recommendation for no changes to the commercial minimum fish size (14-inch total length) and commercial gear requirements for 2025. Given the ongoing action to consider changes to the minimum mesh exemption programs, the MC also did not recommend any changes to these exemption programs for 2025 through the specifications process.

Table 1: Current 2024-2025 catch and landings limits for summer flounder. The Monitoring Committee recommended no changes to the previously adopted limits for 2025.

Measure	2024-2025		Basis
	mil lb	mt	
OFL	22.98 (2024) 24.97 (2025)	10,422 (2024) 11,325 (2025)	Stock assessment projections/SSC Recommendations
ABC	19.32	8,761	SSC Recommendations
ABC dead disc.	4.18	1,895	NEFSC projections; (averaged across 2024-2025)
Com. ACL	10.62	4,819	55% of ABC (FMP commercial allocation)
Com. ACT	10.62	4,819	Previous MC rec: No deduction from ACL for management uncertainty
Expected Com. Dead Disc	1.83	831	Previous MC rec: 44% of ABC dead discards portion, based on 2020-2022 average % dead discards by sector
Com. quota	8.79	3,987	Comm. ACT, minus expected comm. dead discards
Rec. ACL	8.69	3,942	45% of ABC (FMP recreational allocation)
Rec. ACT	8.69	3,942	Previous MC rec: No deduction from ACL for management uncertainty
Expected rec. dead disc.	2.35	1,064	Previous MC rec: 56% of ABC dead discards portion, based on 2020-2022 average % dead discards by sector
RHL	6.35	2,879	Rec. ACT minus expected rec. dead discards

Summer Flounder Commercial Mesh Exemptions Framework/Addendum

Staff presented an overview of the framework/addendum in development to evaluate changes to the Small Mesh Exemption Program (SMEP) and the flynet exemption. The MC was generally supportive of the action development and did not provide additional recommendations. There were some clarifying questions about timelines associated with options in alternative set 2, which considers annual evaluation methodologies that inform the Regional Administrator’s decision of whether to rescind the SMEP. Some concern was expressed that Alternative 2C, the tiered monitoring approach to the SMEP trigger evaluation, involves a longer time period between identifying a potential problem and a corresponding management response, which could be problematic depending on the nature of the issue. Additionally, there was some hesitation about the extra staff resources required for the more in-depth evaluation required under this alternative.

Public Comments

An Advisory Panel (AP) member commended Council staff and all those involved for their thorough review of these exemption programs, noting an initial expectation of a simpler

framework. Conversely, another AP member questioned the necessity of the Council and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission exploring these alternatives.

Scup 2025 Specifications Review

The MC agreed with the staff recommendation for 2025 ACLs, ACTs, and landings limits based on the revised SSC's ABC recommendations for 2025 (Table 2). The SSC recommended a revised ABC for 2025 based on a small error discovered by Northeast Fisheries Science Center staff in the projections used to set measures for 2024-2025. Correcting this error resulted in an approximate 4% increase in the ABC for 2025.

The MC recommends no deductions from the commercial or recreational ACLs to ACTs to account for management uncertainty. The MC agreed with the rationale provided last year when setting measures for 2024-2025, including that the commercial fishery is well controlled, with in-season closure authority, and has not exceeded the quota in the past 10 years. However, the MC noted that there have been recreational overages since 2019, and such overages contributed to the recent OFL overages. The MC expressed that in the future, if these trends continue, considerations of a recreational management uncertainty buffer may be warranted; however, given the current magnitude of scup biomass, the uncertainty associated with the connection between a management uncertainty buffer and the current process for setting recreational measures (the Percent Change Approach), a buffer was not recommended for 2025.

The MC agreed with the staff recommendation to maintain the current method of projecting dead discards for each sector and updating such projections using the most recent information. Resulting in the 2025 commercial quota and RHL shown in Table 2.

The MC recommended no changes to commercial measures which can be modified through specifications (Winter I and II possession limits, commercial minimum fish size, and commercial gear requirements) for 2025. The MC agreed because commercial overages have been rare and the lack of new information, no changes are needed at this time.

Public Comments

One AP member questioned if there was a table available to compare the OFLs and recent OFL overages to the realized fishing mortality rate (F). This AP member suggested a table showing a side-by-side comparison would provide relevant information for the SSC, MC, and Council.

Table 2: Monitoring Committee recommended revised 2025 scup catch and landings limits compared with previously approved 2025 limits.

Measure	2025 <i>(previously approved)</i>		2025 <i>(MC recommended)</i>		Basis for Recommended 2025 Measures
	mil lbs.	mt	mil lbs.	mt	
OFL	40.58	18,408	42.19	19,135	Revised projections provided by the NEFSC
ABC	39.74	18,028	41.31	18,740	Revised projections and previous application of risk policy
ABC discards	9.10	4,129	9.46	4,292	Revised assessment projections
Commercial ACL	25.83	11,718	26.85	12,181	65% of ABC (FMP allocation)
Commercial ACT	25.83	11,718	26.85	12,181	No deduction from ACL for management uncertainty
Projected commercial discards	7.04	3,192	7.38	3,318	78% of ABC discards (avg. % of dead discards from commercial fishery, 2021-2023)
Commercial quota	18.80	8,526	19.54	8,863	Com. ACT minus projected com. discards
Recreational ACL	13.91	6,310	14.46	6,559	35% of ABC (FMP allocation)
Recreational ACT	13.91	6,310	14.46	6,559	No deduction from ACL for management uncertainty
Projected recreational discards	2.07	937	2.08	944	22% of the ABC discards (avg. % of dead discards from rec. fishery, 2021-2023)
RHL	11.84	5,373	12.31	5,585	Rec. ACT minus projected rec. discards

Black Sea Bass 2025 Specifications

Six MC members expressed concern with the 20% decline in the 2025 ABC compared to 2024 as there was not a clear explanation for why biomass was projected to decline so sharply. **Four of these six MC members said they could not endorse use of the SSC's recommended 2025 ABC**, though they acknowledged that the Council is bound by the SSC's ABC recommendations.

The four MC members who could not endorse the 2025 ABC said a decrease in the ABC is not justifiable given that biomass is so far above the target level. One MC member noted that the most recent stock assessment shows a consistently increasing biomass trend during many years when recruitment was variable and catch exceeded the SSC's recommended 2025 ABC. The noteworthy decline in biomass is only in the projection years. The MC agreed that a decline in the ABC would have negative socioeconomic impacts for both the commercial and recreational sectors. One MC member said the very high black sea bass biomass could be having detrimental impacts on other stocks.

After much discussion of potential causes, including input from Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) staff familiar with the projections, the MC did not feel there was a clear explanation for the drivers of the projected decline in biomass. It was noted that there were many changes in the assessment which contributed to a re-scaling of biomass; however, the MC was not able to point to any specific changes in the assessment as driving this degree of a decline in the projected biomass and the ABC.

The staff presentation suggested that part of the reason for the decline in the ABC is that biomass is above the target, the catch limit projections aim to bring biomass down towards the target over time, and the ABC scales with biomass. A few MC members said this explanation did not make sense in this specific case. Declining ABCs would make more sense in the out years of multi-year projections, but not for a single year projection. It would be more logical to increase the 2025 ABC if the goal is to bring biomass down towards the target over time, especially given that the assessment shows increasing biomass under catches that exceed the 2025 ABC and the decline in biomass is only in the projection years.

NEFSC staff noted that the combination of the assumption that future recruitment would be equal to the 2000-2023 average (and therefore a decrease compared to several more recent years) and the strong 2011 and 2015 year classes moving through the population are contributing to the projected decline in biomass. The MC did not think this fully explained the scale of the projected decline and questioned why a more recent time series of recruitment wasn't used to inform the projections. One MC member also pointed out examples of high recruitment following years of high catch. It was noted that the assessment does not assume a relationship between recruitment and stock size. NEFSC staff clarified that the assumption of the 2000-2023 average was peer reviewed through the 2023 research track assessment and they were not able to provide results for alternative assumptions or other sensitivity tests at this time. NEFSC staff also noted that they are in conversation with the Ecosystems Branch of the NEFSC to consider if there are better ways to predict future recruitment rather than using an average value. This and other projection assumptions can be re-evaluated and updated for the projections that will be provided next year. However, it wasn't expected that any re-evaluation or new analysis could be completed in time to inform the 2025 ABC.

The MC agreed it would be useful to have conversations with the stock assessment scientists prior to the next updates to the projections for all three species to consider the most appropriate assumptions for the projections.

One MC member noted that the projections are based on fishing at F_{MSY} . The current management requirements do not allow a large amount of biomass to be removed from the population all at once to help bring highly abundant stocks down to their target level.

The MC agreed with their previous rationale, and the rationale summarized in the [staff memo](#), to **set the commercial and recreational ACTs equal to the ACLs, with no management uncertainty buffers**. They also agreed that **no changes are needed to the methods for projecting commercial and recreational dead discards**, compared to the methods used for 2023-2024, beyond updating the calculations with data through 2023. A few MC members noted that the commercial discard projections seem reasonable as they are in line with recent years' estimates. One MC member expressed concern with the high level of recreational discards in recent years, noting that continued decreases in the recreational harvest limit will only exacerbate this issue. For example, recreational dead discards in 2023 were 38% of the 2023-2024 ACL. The MC also agreed with the rationale summarized in the [staff memo](#) for the **5% commercial in-season closure buffer and no changes to any other commercial measures**.

One MC member responded to an AP comment about commercial hook and line harvest that was summarized in the staff presentation. This MC member noted that it is not legal to recreationally fish on a commercial trip in Virginia.

Public Comments

One AP member expressed concerns that the stock assessment models appear as if they are not designed to allow recovered or expanding stocks. The models do not appear to be designed to ever allow for an increase.

Another AP member asked if there is any evidence that we could be overfishing the black sea bass stock and asked if the stock would be in better shape if there were no overages since 2014. This AP member also asked if the fishing industry should prepare for a 2026 OFL that is below 5,000 MT and also questioned if it is a violation of the FMP for the proportion of commercial and recreational catch to differ from the 45% commercial/55% recreational allocation.

Table 3: Monitoring Committee recommended 2025 black sea bass catch and landings compared with currently implemented 2024 limits.

Measure	2024 (implemented)		Basis	2025 (MC recommendation)		Basis
	mil lb	mt		mil lb	mt	
OFL	17.01	7,716	SSC recommendation based on 2021 Management Track Assessment projections and Council risk policy	13.65	6,193	Projections provided by NEFSC
ABC	16.66	7,557		13.29	6,027	SSC recommendation
Com. ACL	7.50	3,401	45% of ABC (commercial allocation in FMP)	5.98	2,712	45% of ABC (commercial allocation in FMP)
Com. ACT	7.50	3,401	Monitoring Committee recommendation; no deduction from ACL for mgmt. uncertainty	5.98	2,712	No deduction from ACL for mgmt. uncertainty
Projected com. dead discards	1.50	680	3-year avg. proportion of commercial dead catch that was discarded applied to the com. ACL (i.e., 20% based on 2020-2022)	1.20	542	3-year avg. proportion of commercial dead catch that was discarded applied to the com. ACL (i.e., 20% based on 2021-2023)
Com. quota	6.00	2,721	Com. ACT minus projected com. dead discards	4.78	2,170	Com. ACT minus projected com. dead discards
Rec. ACL	9.16	4,156	55% of ABC (recreational allocation in FMP)	7.31	3,315	55% of ABC (recreational allocation in FMP)
Rec. ACT	9.16	4,156	Monitoring Committee recommendation; no deduction from ACL for mgmt. uncertainty	7.31	3,315	No deduction from ACL for mgmt. uncertainty
Projected rec. dead discards	2.89	1,311	Average of average 2020-2022 rec. dead discards and results using commercial method summarized above	2.85	1,294	Average of average 2021-2023 rec. dead discards and results using commercial method summarized above
RHL	6.27	2,845	Rec. ACT minus projected rec. dead discards	4.46	2,021	Rec. ACT minus projected rec. dead discards

Recommendation Against 20% Reduction in Black Sea Bass ABC for 2025 - 2026

Introduction

This briefing provides a detailed analysis of the recent recommendation by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) for a 20% reduction in the Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for Black Sea Bass from 2025 - 2026. Based on the latest stock assessments, fishery performance data, and insights from the Monitoring Committee, this reduction is not justified and could lead to negative economic and ecological impacts.

Main Concerns

1. Healthy Stock Status:

- The 2024 Management Track Stock Assessment confirms that the Black Sea Bass stock is not overfished, and overfishing is not occurring.
- **Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB)** in 2023 was estimated at **54.17 million pounds**, which is **2.19 times the target level**, indicating a robust and thriving population.

2. Performance vs. Projections:

- The recommendation for a 20% reduction in ABC is primarily based on projections for 2025 - 2026, which **do not align with the current trends** observed in the assessment data.
- **Biomass has continued to increase** and **management has continued to mostly reduce harvest** since 2017. Further reductions to catch do not align with the goal of reducing biomass down to the target (Chart 1). There is no indication that current levels of recruitment will not maintain current biomass levels (Chart 2).
- **Harvest has been relatively consistent across sectors.** Most of the increases in numbers of dead fish appear to be driven by numbers of recreational dead discards which suggests there may be errors with how these values are estimated (Chart 2).
- **The 2024 projections have not been thoroughly evaluated** and should be revisited, as they appear out of sync with observed trends.

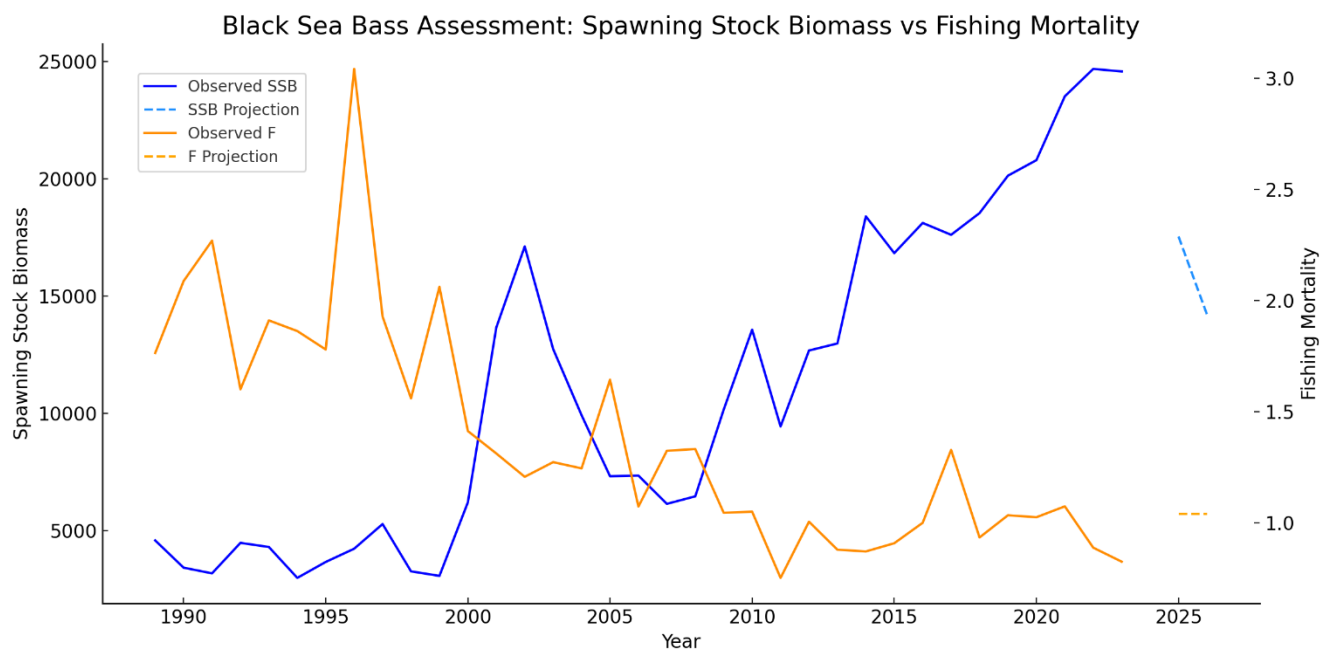


Chart 1. Data Source: Draft 2024 Black Sea Bass Management Track Assessment Report

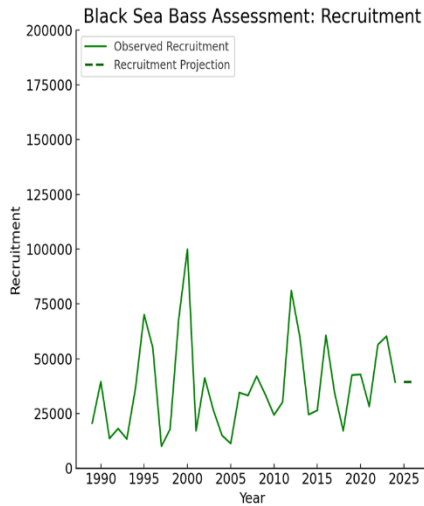
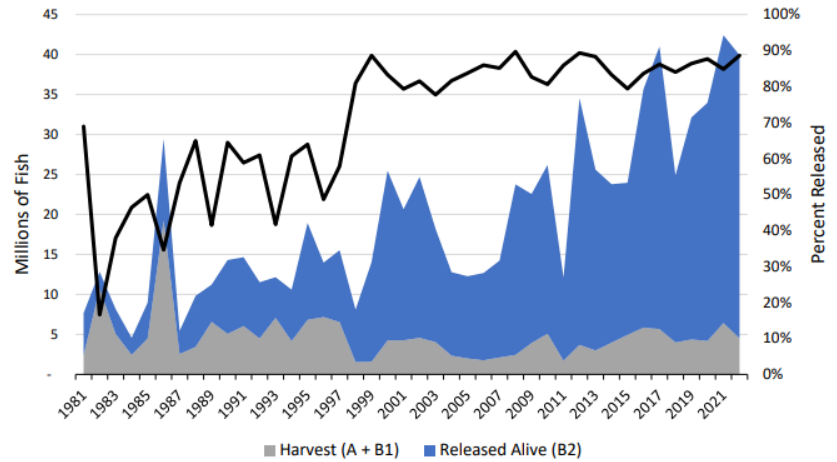


Chart 2: Data source: Draft 2024 Black Sea Bass Management Track Assessment Report



*Discard estimates for NC north of Cape Hatteras for 2022 are not yet available.

Chart 3. Data source: 2022 ASMFC Black Sea Bass Fishery Management Plan Review
Black line is the percent of fish caught + released out of total catch.

3. Potential Negative Impacts of Under-Harvesting:

- **Ecological Impacts:** Under-harvesting a stock can disrupt the balance within an ecosystem, leading to unintended consequences such as increased mortality to prey populations or changes in predator-prey dynamics.
- **Economic Impacts:** A 20% reduction in ABC could unnecessarily constrain both commercial and recreational sectors, leading to lost economic opportunities and reduced community benefits.
- **Public Perception:** Such a reduction could undermine public confidence in fishery management and compliance with regulations, especially when stakeholders perceive decisions as not aligning with the data.

4. Monitoring Committee's Additional Insights:

- **Biomass and Recruitment:** The Monitoring Committee highlighted that the assumed average recruitment in projection years is contributing to the decline in biomass, but this does not fully explain the 20% decrease in ABC.
- **Dead Discards:** Projections for dead discards are up and reflect almost **40% of the ACT**. How discards are calculated may not be appropriate.
- **Model Limitations:** Concerns were raised that the stock assessment models may be managing to the higher biomass level and not targets. Assessment staff were unable to confirm or deny this during the monitoring committee meeting.
- **Need for Reevaluation:** The Committee recommended further discussions with stock assessment scientists to consider better ways to predict future recruitment and reassess assumptions used in projections.

Recommendation: Given the current robust stock status, we recommend advocating against the proposed ABC reduction and maintaining the current management strategies to continue the positive trends observed until the current assessment model and projections are thoroughly evaluated.

From: [Steve Doctor -DNR-](#)
To: [Hart, Hannah](#)
Cc: [Beaty, Julia](#); [Kiley Dancy](#); [Tracey Bauer](#); [Chelsea Tuohy](#); [Clarke, Peter](#); LORENA.DELAGARZA@deq.nc.gov; [ALEXA GALVAN](#); [Keiley, Emily](#); elise.koob@mass.gov; mike.schmidtke@safmc.net; [Sysak, Rachel H \(DEC\)](#); [Corinne Truesdale](#); [Samuel Truesdell - NOAA Federal](#); [Gregory Wojcik](#); [Wasserman, Ben \(DNREC\)](#); [Wood, Anthony](#)
Subject: Re: Reminder and briefing materials for next Thursday's MC meeting
Date: Thursday, August 8, 2024 11:18:32 AM

Check this out. I have developed a new model to predict overages in discards and the effect on the 2026 RHL given the proposed 2025 harvest limits. Please peer review and include in the briefing document.

Thanks

The recreational ACT is made up of discards and harvest. Using the projections given to us in 2024 dead discards are projected to be 39% of the ACT, but with such a low RHL they will probably be way higher. So let's say for once I am right and their SSB projections are wrong and the SSB has not decreased. We shoot for a RHL of 4.49 with 2.86 discards and we overshoot the RHL and the discards, as we have for seven of nine years. We could actually have a negative RHL going into 2026. The too low recreational RHL is causing dead discards to soar (39% in 2024). Further reducing the RHL every year is creating a race to a zero RHL. There is a realistic probability of a negative RHL going into 2026 with SSB at 200% of target.

The RHL overage for the past ten years has been -5% to 89%. The discard overage for the past years has been 282% to -54%. Discard overages have averaged 125.8% for the past five years.

Year	Rec	dead discards	Recreational harvest
2014	0.84		3.67
2015	0.82		3.79
2016	1.21		5.19
2017	1.27		4.16
2018	1.1		3.82
2019	0.5		3.46
2020	3.05		9.05
2021	3.55		11.97
2022	3.69		8.14
2023	3.52		7.49
2024	2.86		4.49
target			

Biomass is at an all time high. We try to limit the fishery to 4.49 RHL and discards are going to soar. Let's say discards are 125% over projected in 2024, the last five years average overage

. Discards could be 6.21 million pounds in 2025, much higher than the RHL proposed for 2026.

Thanks for your review and including in the briefing documents

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