



COASTAL RESOURCES DIVISION

ONE CONSERVATION WAY • BRUNSWICK, GA 31520 • 912-264-7218

WALTER RABON
COMMISSIONER

DOUG HAYMANS
DIRECTOR

November 10, 2025

Honorable Howard Lutnick
Secretary
United States Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20230

Secretary Lutnick:

Thank you for your efforts to improve fish conservation in the United States. On April 17, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14276, Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness. The Order directs the United States Department of Commerce and NOAA to expand the use of Exempted Fishing Permits (EFPs) thereby expanding access to fishing and improving data collection.

Georgia is pleased to submit the attached EFP, which we believe meets the goals of President Trump's Executive Order 14276. Under the EFP, Georgia will create a new state data collection system. Working with anglers, this new system will help us better understand the abundance of red snapper off our coast as well as better understand the fishery, thereby enabling us to make better management decisions.

We ask that our EFP be given prompt approval so that we may begin preparation for the 2026 fishing season. Thank you for your immediate attention and we look forward to working with you and answering any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Doug Haymans
Director

CC: Governor Brian Kemp, Georgia
Congressman Buddy Carter (GA-1)
Walter Rabon, Commissioner GADNR
Harry Kumar, Asst. Sec. for Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs (Commerce)
Eugenio Pineiro Soler, Assistant Administrator, NOAA Fisheries
Andy Strelcheck, SE Regional Administrator, NOAA Fisheries
Dr. Carolyn Belcher, Chief of Fisheries, GADNR CRD



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Applicant

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Purpose

1. Determine if recreational landings of Red Snapper (*Lutjanus campechanus*) can be accurately reported and monitored through a state managed data collection program.
 - a. Develop and test a mandatory data collection program modeled from the VESL program currently being used by South Carolina Department of Natural Resources.
 - b. Validate state estimates of landings and discards against the same estimates produced by the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP).
2. Provide recreational anglers and for-hire anglers with increased fishing opportunities by offering a 2-month season.
3. Collect biological information including size, age, and reproductive characteristics (when possible).

Background

Since 2008, Red Snapper landings have either been prohibited or managed through short seasons which incited derby-style fisheries. Although the stock is not yet rebuilt (SEDAR 73

Update 2024), the results of the last four stock assessments have shown a strong rebuilding trajectory, which agrees with the high abundance observed by the recreational fishery. Contrary to this trend, fishing seasons have become increasingly shorter, with the high numbers of discards identified as the key issue.

Currently, the only source for recreational catch data in Georgia is MRIP. MRIP and its use for catch estimation has received a high level of scrutiny in recent years which resulted in numerous survey changes in the hope that the precision of estimates could be improved. For species commonly reported through Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS) creel surveys, the survey performs adequately with percent standard errors (PSE) below 30%; however, for species that are rarely encountered during APAIS, like Red Snapper, the survey struggles to produce PSEs below 50%. Since 1981, the total catch estimates generated by MRIP for Red Snapper off Georgia have not shown a single PSE below 35%. Since 2008, Red Snapper have been managed under closed seasons or mini seasons which further erode the confidence in those estimates as MRIP is designed to sample two-month time periods. The lack of precision and a paucity of information about the number of recreational anglers who participate in saltwater fishing activities in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) confound the survey's ability to produce reliable catch estimates for Red Snapper.

Recreational interest groups engaged the South Atlantic states in 2024, asking them to consider a state led data collection and management approach for Red Snapper, similar to what had evolved for the Gulf states between 2012 and 2020. The four South Atlantic states met on four occasions between July 2024 and July 2025 to review the data programs in place throughout the Gulf and additional programs used on the Pacific west coast. Additional state directors' meetings were held virtually and in person to discuss potential paths forward, which resulted in a consensus among the states to apply for federal exempted fishing permits (EFPs) that would allow each South Atlantic state to evaluate alternative data collection approaches to MRIP. If the states are successful, the next step could lead to discussions on the roles the states could assume in management of Red Snapper and/or other offshore species.

Methods

Licensure: This EFP will allow properly licensed private recreational and for-hire anglers to harvest Red Snapper from state and federal waters out to 200 nautical miles off Georgia. Proper licensure for private anglers currently includes a Georgia recreational fishing license and Saltwater Information Program permit. Charter guides must be properly licensed in Georgia and, when fishing in the EEZ, must have a valid South Atlantic Charter/Headboat Permit for Snapper Grouper. A reef/migratory fish endorsement is being sought through the Georgia legislature and would also be required. If for some reason, the endorsement is not available or implemented in time, this EFP is being designed to function without the endorsement.

Season: MRIP was designed to sample 2-month intervals, not short pulses of fishing. However, since 2008 Red Snapper have been managed under seasonal closures or mini seasons, adding to the lack of confidence in the estimates produced for this fishery at the regional level. Compounded with the lack of confidence in state level catch data, discussions regarding state allocations would prove difficult at this time. As an alternative approach, Georgia will examine the effects of a 61- or 62-day season which would align with MRIP Wave 3, 4, or 5. This will allow for a state survey to be validated with the equivalent MRIP wave. A longer season will provide anglers with greater flexibility and more opportunity to fish without causing fishing derby related behaviors. Georgia is requesting this seasonal variance for a minimum of one year.

A longer season would also allow for the collection of a larger sample of fishery-dependent biological data. GADNR Coastal Resources Division (CRD) hosts a carcass donation program for recreationally important fish species such as Southern Kingfish, Red Drum, and Spotted Seatrout; however, during previous Red Snapper seasons they were used for the collection of Red Snapper carcasses. Carcasses are processed by CRD staff for age and length information as well as sex and reproductive staging when gonads are present. Chest freezers are located at several sites along the coast. Each freezer contains a supply of storage bags, pens, and trip information cards for anglers to fill out and submit with their carcasses. Freezers will continue to be available for Red Snapper carcasses during the full duration of the EFP.

Size and Creel: Anglers will be allowed to keep one Red Snapper per person per day with no minimum size limit. The captain and crew on any charter or headboat trip will be prohibited from retaining their daily creel of Red Snapper.

Reporting: Participating anglers and for-hire guides will be required to engage a data reporting program to register to fish for Red Snapper under this EFP. To accomplish this task, Georgia will implement an electronic data collection program. Bluefin Data LLC currently provides the state of South Carolina with an electronic reporting platform for state licensed and federal charter vessels and headboats, known as VESL. Bluefin Data will develop a similar application for Georgia that will be used to collect landings and discard data from the private recreational sector and state-only for-hire guides landing Red Snapper in Georgia. South Atlantic Charter/Headboat permitted guides already have mandatory reporting requirements associated with their permits (Southeast For-hire Integrated Electronic Reporting) and will use these established data collection applications to report.

Upon initial contact with the data reporting program, the private recreational angler will attest to conditions stipulated by the EFP including mandatory reporting during the defined season. If an angler does not agree with the conditions, they will not be allowed to legally harvest Red Snapper during the season. Anglers landing Red Snapper in Georgia will be

required to report to the state system regardless of where the fish were caught. Each angler will be required to obtain a trip number from the data reporting program when targeting Red Snapper. When approached by law enforcement, trip numbers will be checked with the data reporting program for that day. For instances where license-exempted anglers (e.g., under 16 years of age), or licensed anglers who do not have access to a smartphone or computer, alternate trip participants may submit data on their behalf. This also applies to state-only for-hire guides fishing under this EFP. A method will be included on the mandatory post-trip reporting application for this purpose, and additional data fields will be displayed for the designated trip representative to complete reporting for these individuals. If an angler is found out of compliance, they will be denied future access to fish for Red Snapper under any associated EFP and could receive federal penalties for fishing out of season.

Registered users will be contacted by phone when errors occur, or if a trip is flagged as incomplete. Additional at-sea and landings intercepts by law enforcement can assist with verifying anglers have authorization codes and identify charter trips that can later be connected to a mandatory report. A current state project focused on obtaining trip level data for federally permitted charter vessels collected by an at-sea observer could be used as an additional source of validation. Additional catch data, including sizes and disposition of released fishes, are also collected during this project.

Outreach: Outreach materials will be created and distributed to assist recreational anglers and the charter/headboat fleet with understanding the expectations and requirements for participating under the EFP.

The outcome of the 2026 EFP will provide guidance on the need and refinement of future EFP applications. Currently Georgia is considering an additional two years, which would cover 2027 and 2028.

Data Objectives

1. Information to be collected through the state survey program:
 - a. **Prior to fishing:** Name and contact of registered angler (contact will be email and/or phone number) / Trip number / Trip date / Trip start time / Landing county and site / Vessel registration number or US Coast Guard Documentation number
 - b. **At trip completion:** Trip end time / Location fished or depth fished / Number of Red Snapper harvested / Number of Red Snapper released and general fate (alive or dead) / Hours spent fishing for Red Snapper
2. Determine harvest rates for private and for-hire recreational sectors in Georgia when targeting Red Snapper.

3. Provide additional biological data for use in developing age-length keys for use in stock assessment.
4. Results of the EFP will be used to assist fisheries managers in future decisions regarding Red Snapper management.
5. Develop a more timely and reliable method for monitoring the catch of Red Snapper encountered by Georgia anglers.

Applicable CFR Regulations

- EFP is submitted to the Southeast Regional Office under the authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (16 U.S.C. 1801 et seq.), and regulations 50 CFR 600.745 (b) concerning exempted fishing.
- EFP is requesting an exemption from the following regulations:
 - **50 CFR 622.181(c)(2) Red Snapper**
Red snapper may only be harvested or possessed in or from the South Atlantic EEZ during the commercial and recreational seasons as specified in §§ 622.183(b)(5) and 622.193(y). Any red snapper caught in the South Atlantic EEZ during a time other than the specified commercial or recreational seasons specified in § 622.193(y) must be released immediately with a minimum of harm. In addition, for a person on board a vessel for which a valid Federal commercial or charter vessel/headboat permit for South Atlantic snapper-grouper has been issued, the prohibition on the harvest or possession of red snapper applies in the South Atlantic, regardless of where such fish are harvested or possessed, i.e., in state or Federal waters.
 - **50 CFR 622.8 (b) Quota closures**
When a quota specified in this part is reached or is projected to be reached, the Assistant Administrator will file a notification to that effect with the Office of the Federal Register. On and after the effective date of such notification, for the remainder of the fishing year, the applicable closure restrictions for such a quota, as specified in this part apply. See the applicable annual catch limits (ACLs), annual catch targets (ACTs), and accountability measures (AMs) sections in subparts B through U of this part for closure provisions when an applicable ACL or ACT is reached or projected to be reached.

Potential Questions

Are there any anticipated environmental impacts on fisheries, marine mammals, endangered species, or essential fish habitat?

Recreational fishing occurs during the requested time intervals regardless of Red Snapper harvest, thus impacts to marine mammals, endangered species, and essential fish habitat should remain the same. Although the EFP will increase the targeted trips for Red Snapper, the amount of recreational fishing that could result in the catch of Red Snapper should not be impacted. The requested EFP would allow for Red Snapper to be retained that would have been counted as discards during the fishing season. According to Topping et al (2019), it is possible an extended season would result in reduced effort and harvest rates as fishermen would have more opportunities to fish.

What is the potential risk to the Red Snapper stock?

According to the 2024 update of SEDAR 73, the stock is not overfished but not yet rebuilt. Although the 2024 update indicated overfishing was still occurring, Amendment 59 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region revised the fishing level reference point resulting in a change of status supporting overfishing is no longer occurring. It has also been noted in Amendment 59 that the rebuilding plan is ahead of schedule. As noted in the previous answer, the amount of recreational fishing that could result in the catch of Red Snapper should not be affected. As such, the potential risk to the stock is expected to be low.

References

SEDAR 73 Update Assessment. 2024. South Atlantic red snapper stock assessment report. Southeast Data, Assessment and Review. North Charleston, South Carolina.
<http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/>.

Topping, T.S., M.K. Streich, M.R. Fisher, G.W. Stunz. 2019. A comparison of private recreational fishing harvest and effort for Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper during derby and extended federal seasons and implications for future management. *North American Journal of Fisheries Management*, 39:1311 – 1320.