
GEORGIA
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
COASTAL RESOURCES DIVISION
Red Drum Regulation Change Proposal
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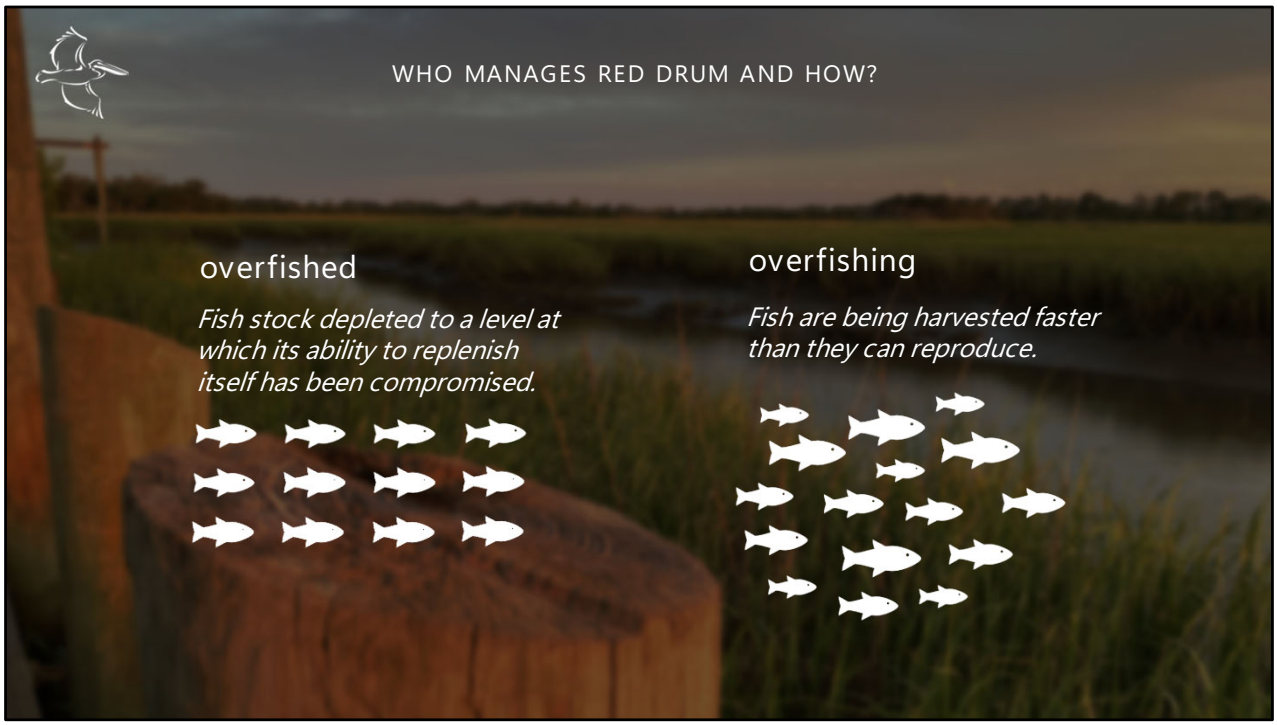
Red drum are managed cooperatively on the entire Atlantic coast, not just in Georgia. This is because the red drum population is shared amongst the states, and individual fish move across state lines in nearshore waters.

Participating states work together through a group called the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, or ASMFC, to manage red drum and other regional species.

Georgia is a member of this compact and is obligated to follow its fishery management plans.

In 2024, Georgia participated in the ASMFC's Red Drum Stock Assessment.

The stock assessment found that the southern stock of red drum are overfished and experiencing overfishing.

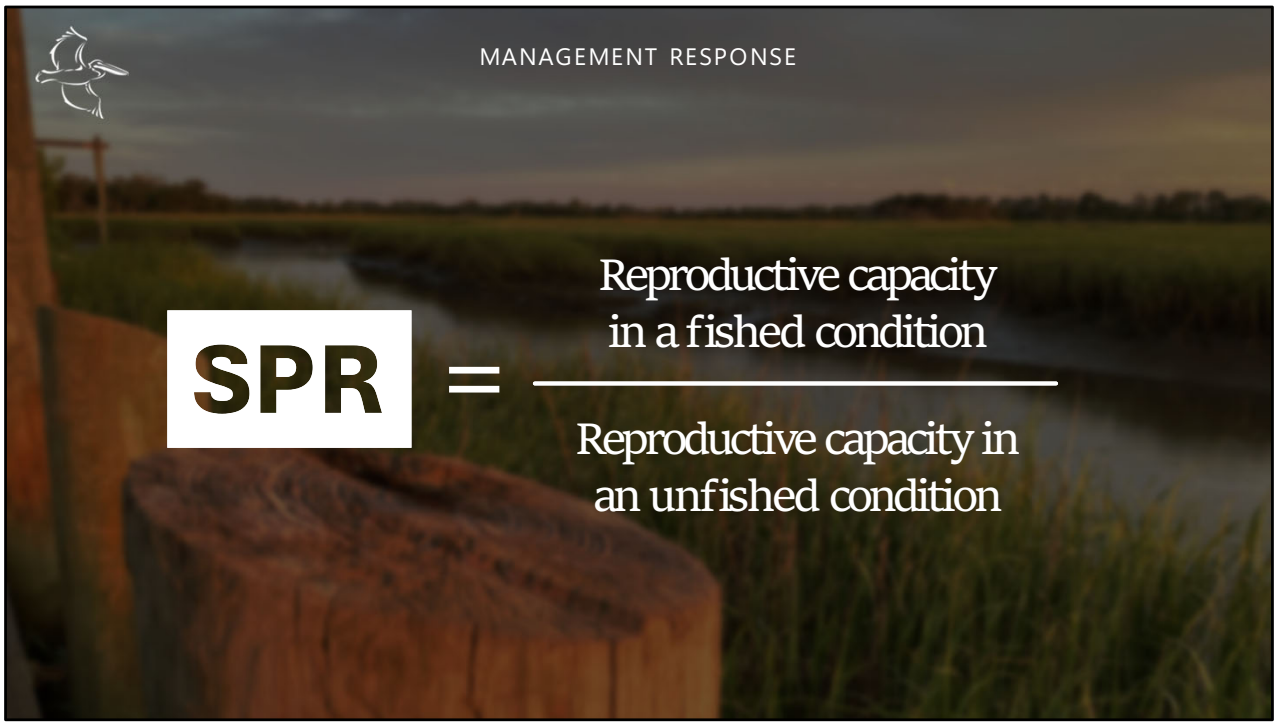


Overfished means that the fish stock is depleted to a level at which its ability to replenish itself has been compromised. This means a stock cannot bounce back from fishing like it can when it's not overfished. Overfishing means that fish are being harvested faster than they can reproduce. Successive years of overfishing can eventually lead to an overfished stock.

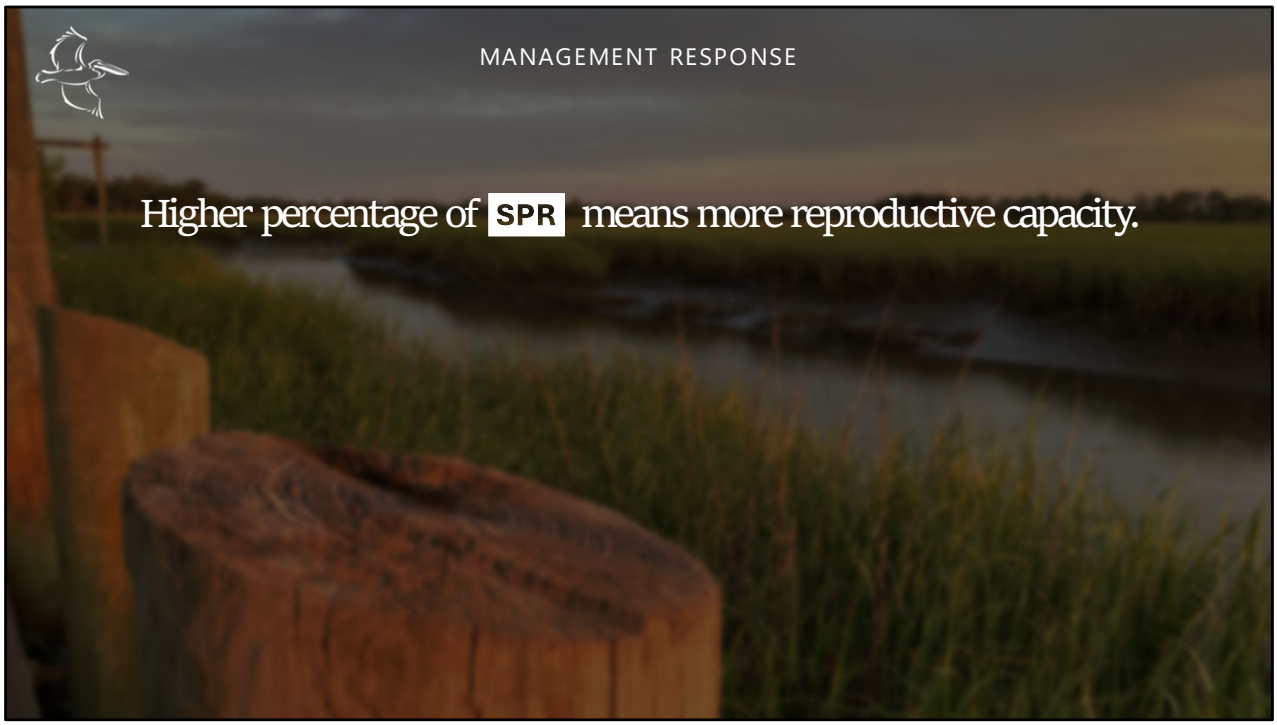
These assessment results require fisheries managers to take action to help red drum populations.

Red drum are currently managed to meet certain levels of spawning potential ratio.

Spawning potential ratio, or SPR, measures the reproductive capacity of a population based on two stock scenarios or conditions.

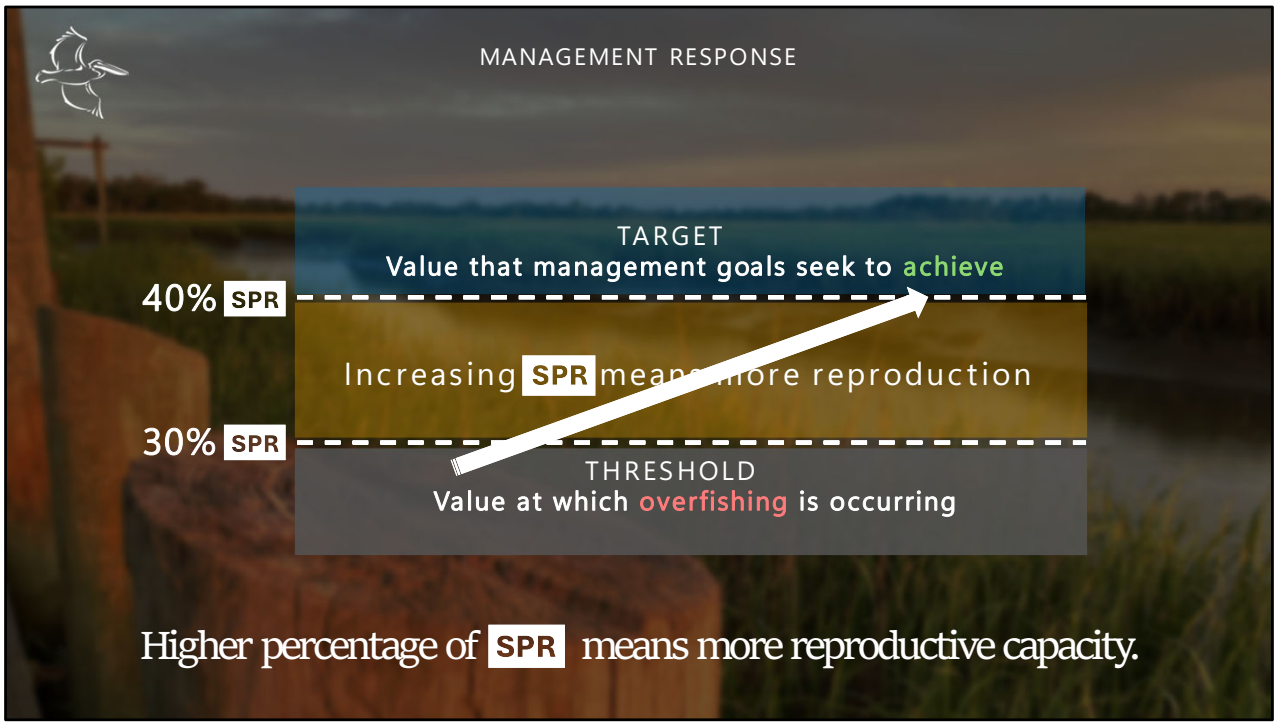


These conditions are first, the reproductive capacity of the population in a fished condition, and second, the reproductive capacity of a population in an unfished condition. The ratio of these conditions over time provides an SPR percentage as the status of the population changes.



A higher percentage of SPR means that there's more reproductive capacity in a population, and an unfished population would have an SPR of 100 percent.

Red drum are managed by ASMFC with an overfished threshold of 30 percent and a target of 40 percent. This means that a population with an SPR value less than 30 percent is considered overfished, while a value above 40 percent is desired.



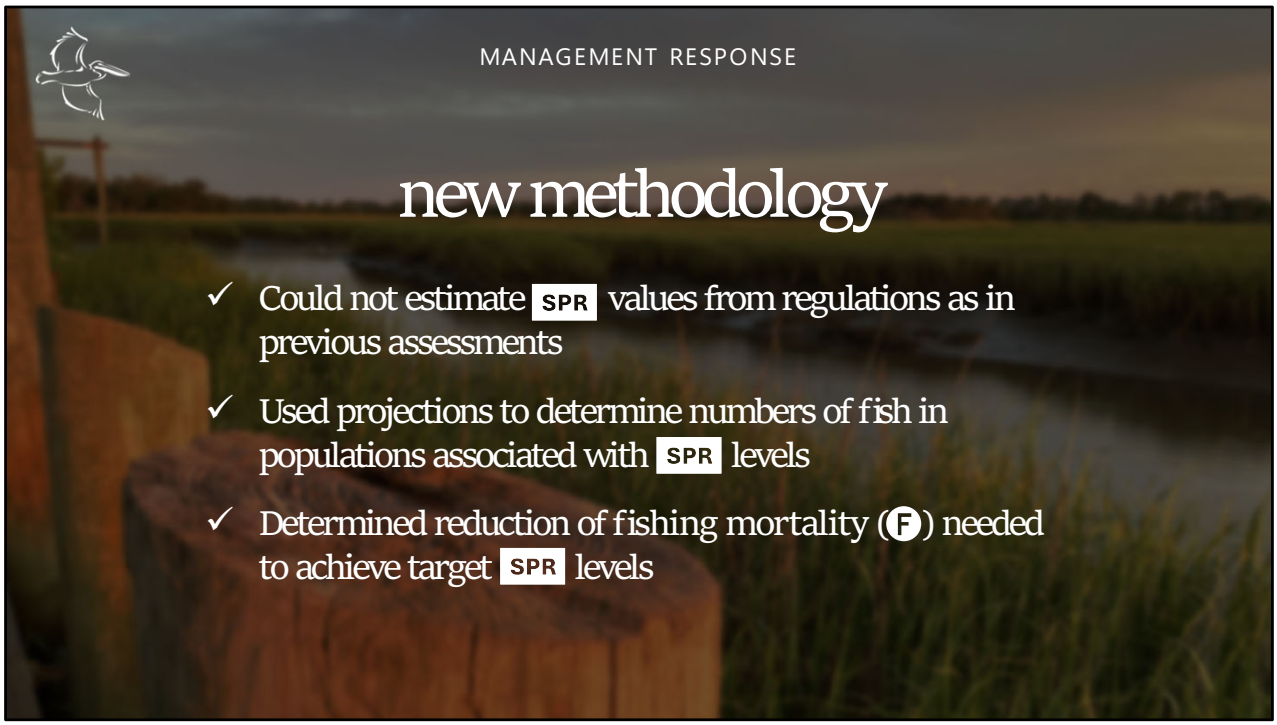
This slide provides an illustration of the management levels of SPR. Thirty percent SPR is the threshold value under which the population is overfished. Forty percent SPR is a target that management seeks to have the population at. Increasing SPR means more reproductive capacity within the population, which is better for the population.

In 2025, the ASMFC's Sciaenids Board revised Amendment Two of the Red Drum Fishery Management Plan. This allowed states to set management goals at or above the 30 percent SPR threshold, instead of at the previous 40 percent SPR target.

The amendment accounts for new assessment projections, allows flexibility for regulation changes, and does not unfairly punish states that changed regulations after the 2024 stock assessment began. It's important to note that the 2024 stock assessment used data only up to 2022, so any regulation change that happened between 2022 and 2024 was not included in the assessment.

Georgia's current red drum regulations are based on SPR values identified in ASMFC's 2002 Fishery Management Plan, Amendment Two. In 2002, management SPR values were estimated directly by a model based on what each state's proposed regulations were.

ASMFC's 2024 stock assessment used a new methodology.

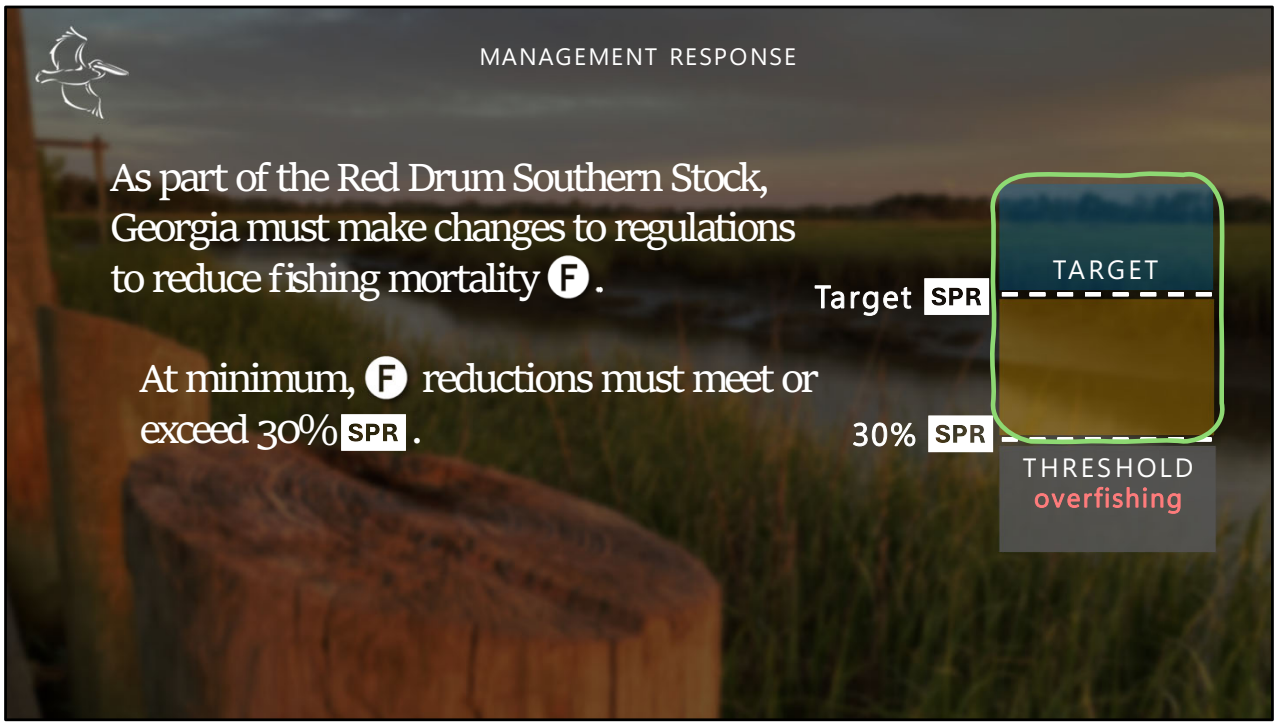


The new methodology could not estimate SPR values directly from regulations as previous assessments did. Instead, it used projections to determine the number of fish in a population associated with various SPR levels. Then the reduction in fishing mortality needed to achieve those SPR target levels was estimated.

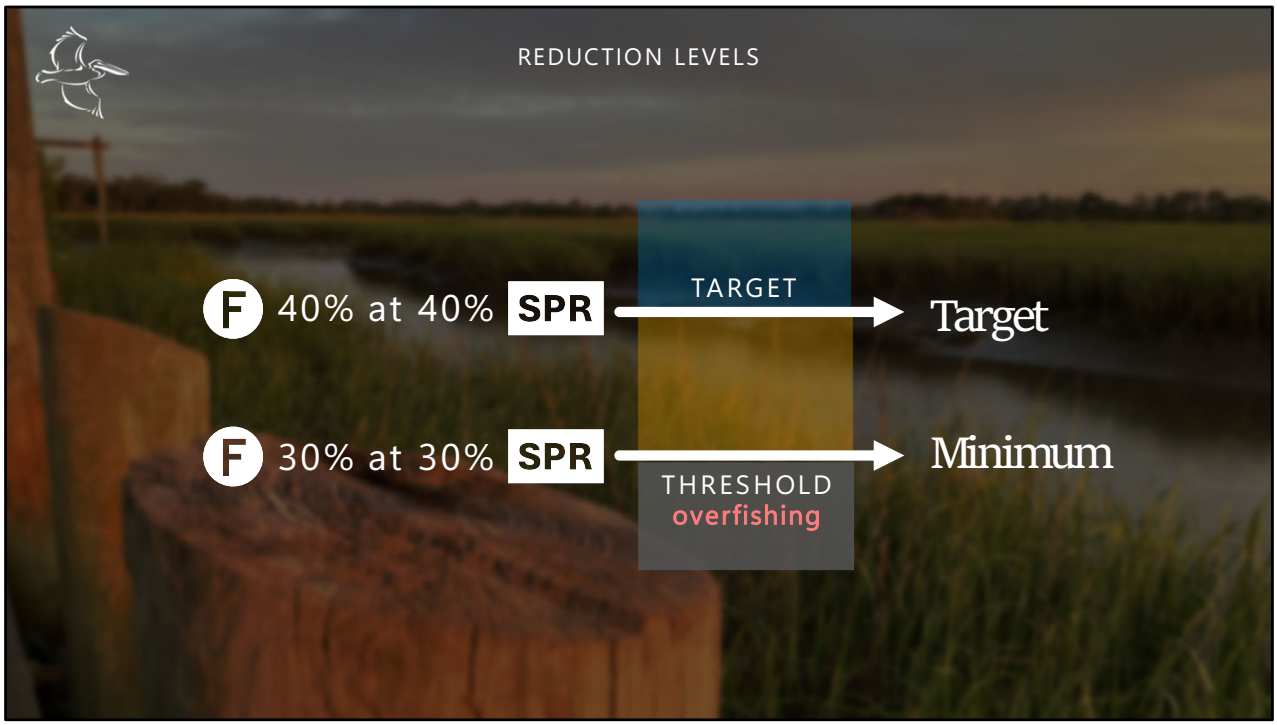
Fishing mortality, or F, is the rate that fish are removed from a population through fishing activities. This includes both harvest and discards.

Next, we'll talk about fishing mortality reduction levels as part of the red drum southern stock.

Georgia must make changes to regulations to reduce fishing mortality. Those reductions are necessary to achieve SPR goals.



At a minimum, the reductions must reach a level that meets or exceeds the 30 percent SPR threshold.



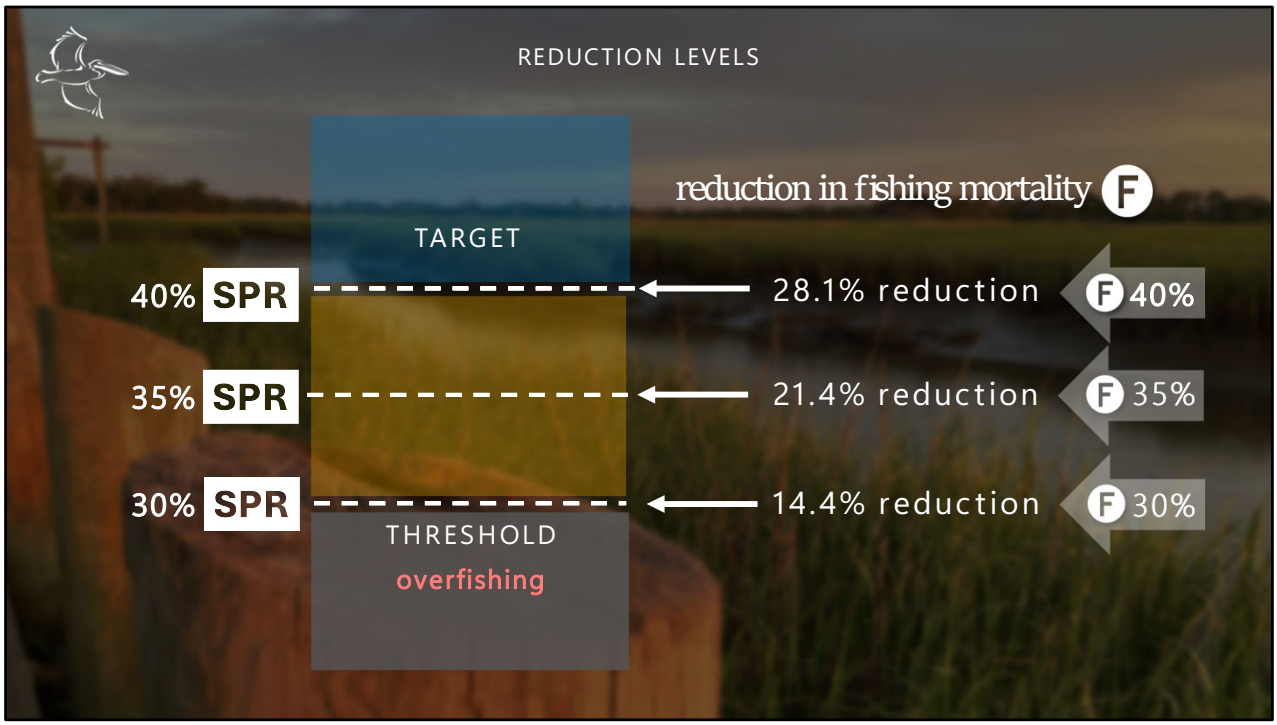
hen discussing SPR and F, it's important to know that F is used as a management proxy for SPR.

This means we adjust the value of F to achieve an associated SPR goal.

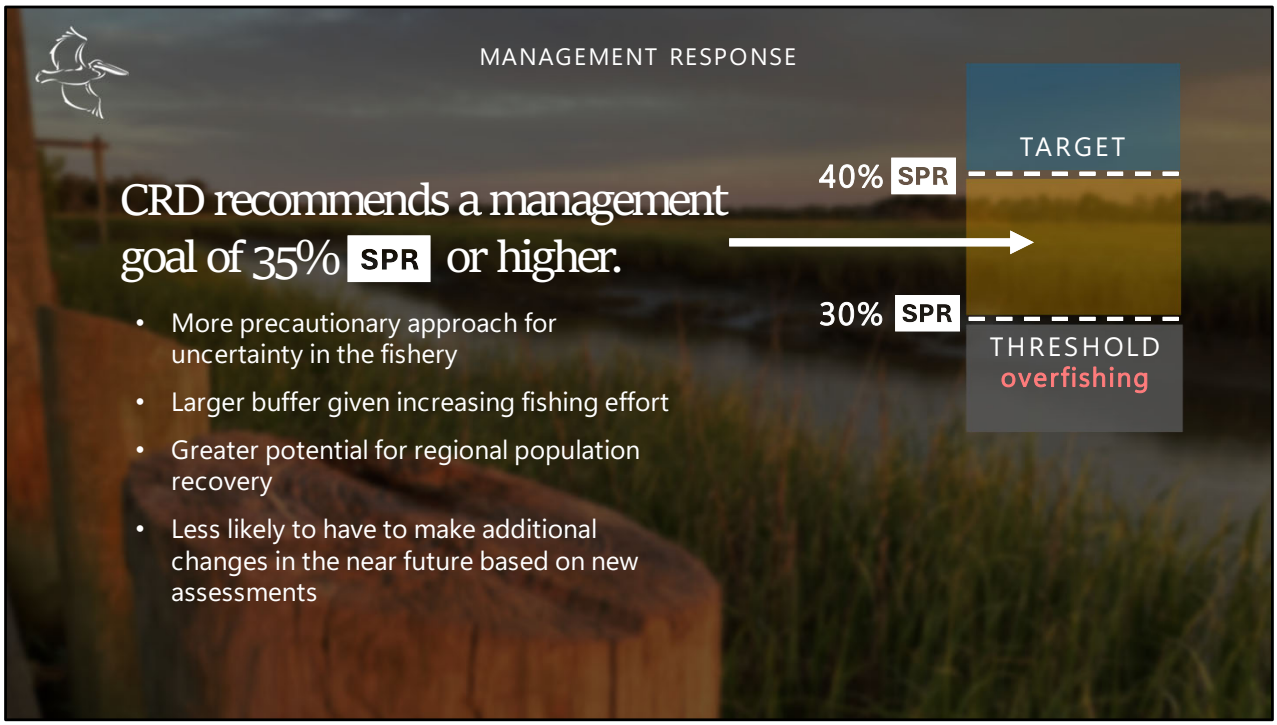
The notation F40 represents the fishing mortality value at an SPR target level of 40 percent.

Similarly, F30 represents the fishing mortality level at 30 percent SPR, the overfished threshold.

The fishing mortality levels at F30 and F40 are not the actual reductions needed.



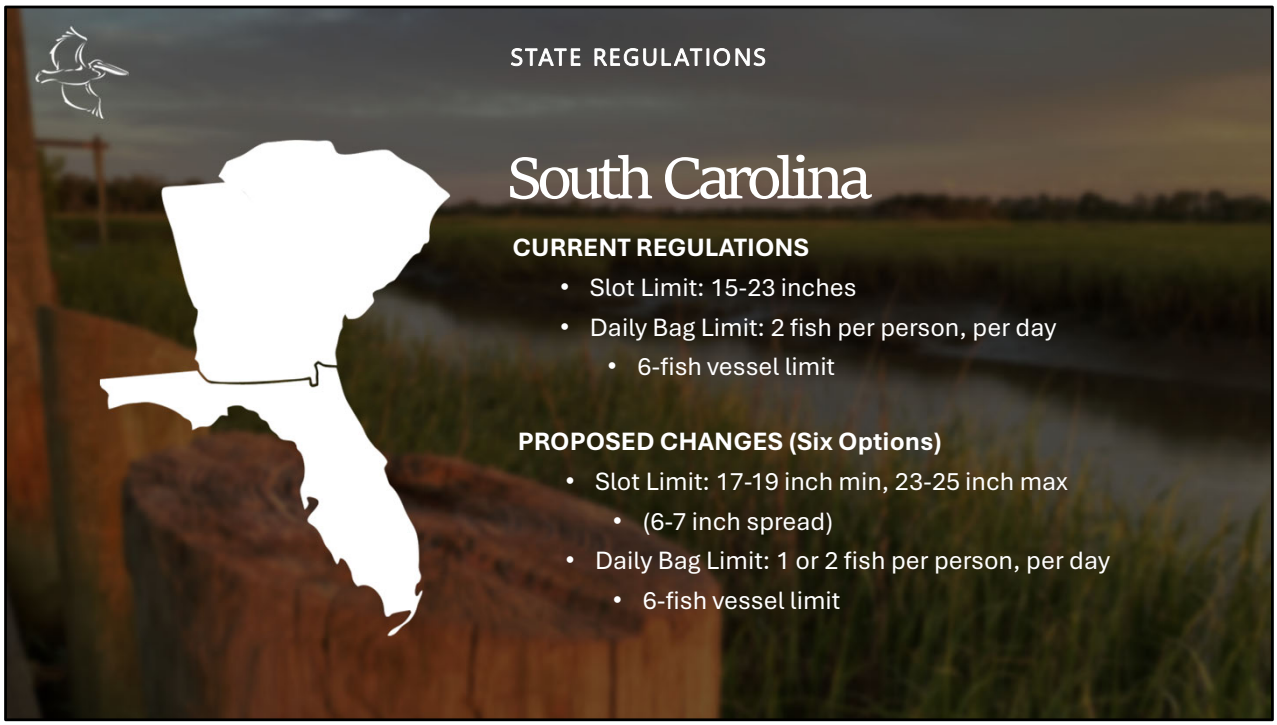
To achieve 40 percent SPR, we need a 28.1 percent reduction in fishing mortality. To achieve 30 percent SPR, we need a 14.4 percent reduction. To achieve 35 percent SPR, we need a 21.4 percent reduction.



CRD recommends a management goal of 35 percent SPR or higher. This is a more precautionary approach than 30 percent SPR and accounts for uncertainty in the fishery. It also provides a larger buffer and greater potential for population recovery. It is less likely that Georgia would need additional changes in the future if the population declines.

Now we'll discuss state regulations for red drum.

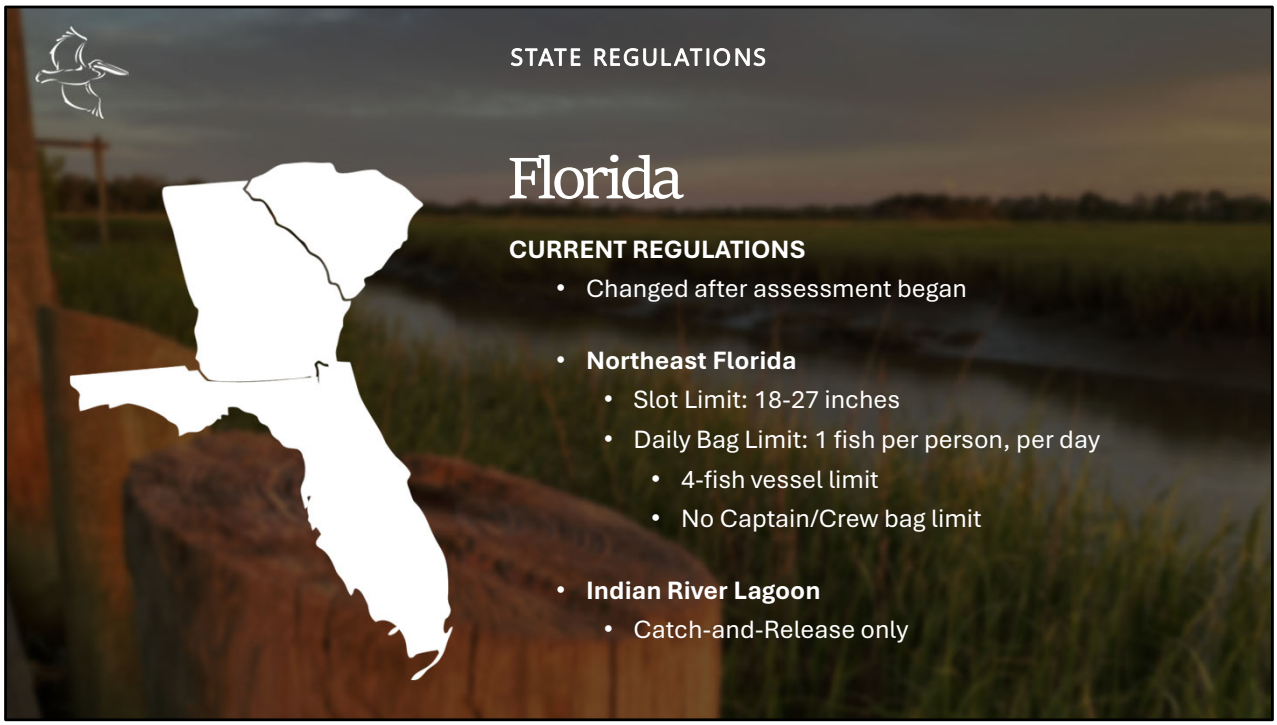
South Carolina, Georgia, and east Florida are part of the southern stock.



South Carolina's current regulations feature a slot limit of 15 to 23in a daily bag limit of two fish per person per day, and a six fish vessel limit. Proposed changes based on response to the stock assessment\ includes six options.

These have lower slot limits of 17 to 19in, with upper slot limits of 23 to 25in. Each one of these options has a 6 or 7 inch slot width.

The daily bag limit is 1 or 2 fish per person per day, with a six fish vessel limit.



Florida's red drum management is based on different state regions.

Florida's current regulations were changed after the assessment began in the northeast Florida region, adjacent to Georgia's coast. The slot limit is 18 to 27in, with a daily bag limit of one fish per person per day. It has a four fish vessel limit with no charter captain or crew bag limit.

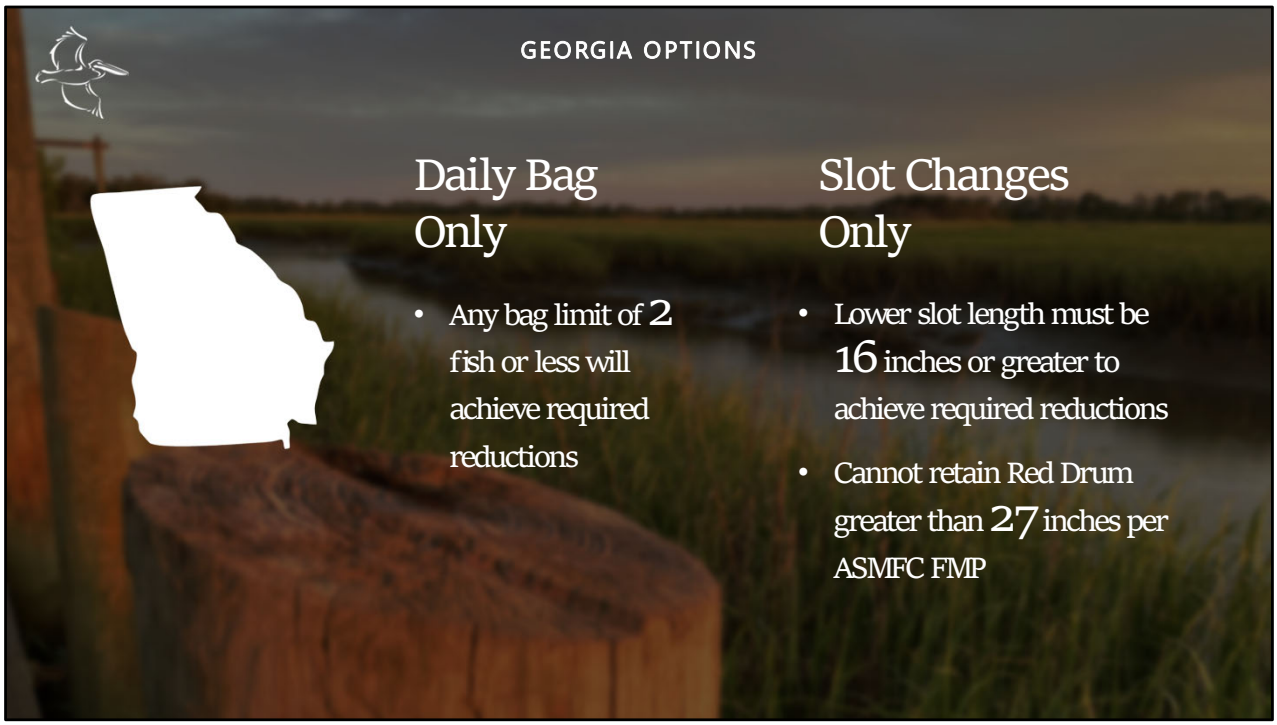
The Indian River lagoon region to the south has catch and release only regulations.

Now we'll talk about Georgia’s regulations.

Georgia has had a number of red drum regulation changes throughout its history. Most of these occurred in the late 80s and early 90s, when the red drum population was recovering from historic lows.

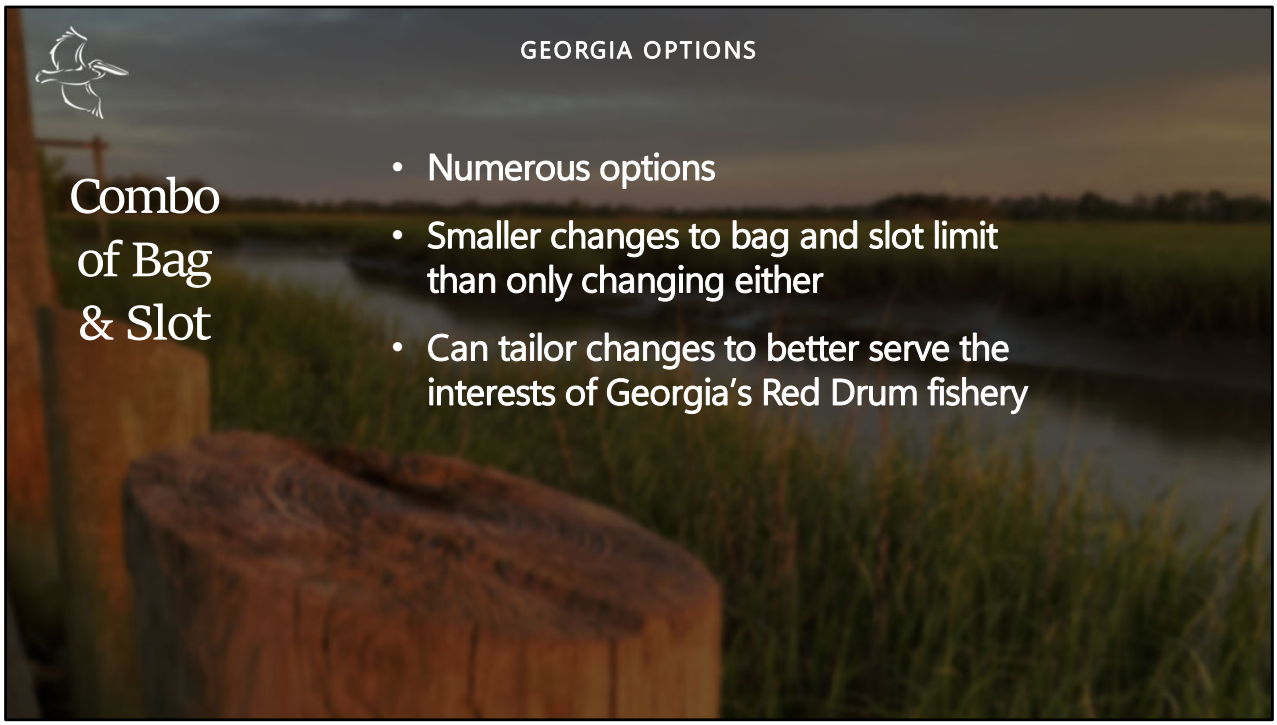
The current regulations were established in 2002, and those consist of a five fish daily bag limit with a slot of 14 to 23in to meet required reductions.

Georgia must now update its regulations.



There are several things to consider. One option is to change just the daily bag limit. In this case, any bag limit of two fish or fewer will achieve the required reductions. Looking at changing slot size, only the lower slot length must be at least 16in or greater to achieve the required reductions, regardless of the upper slot limit. It is important to note that the ASMFC's FMP states that Red drum over 27in cannot be retained.

Another option is to use a combination of daily bag and slot changes to achieve management goals.



Numerous options are available for this approach. Changing a combination of bag and slot limits together could change existing regulations less than by only changing either individually. Changes can be better tailored to serve the interest of Georgia's red drum fishery.

Now we'll talk about the five options CRD is proposing. All of these options exceed the fishing mortality reductions needed to achieve SPR management goals.

- A slot size of 16 to 25in and a bag limit of four fish, which achieves the f 40% level,
- a slot size of 16 to 25in and a bag limit of three fish also achieves the f 40% level.

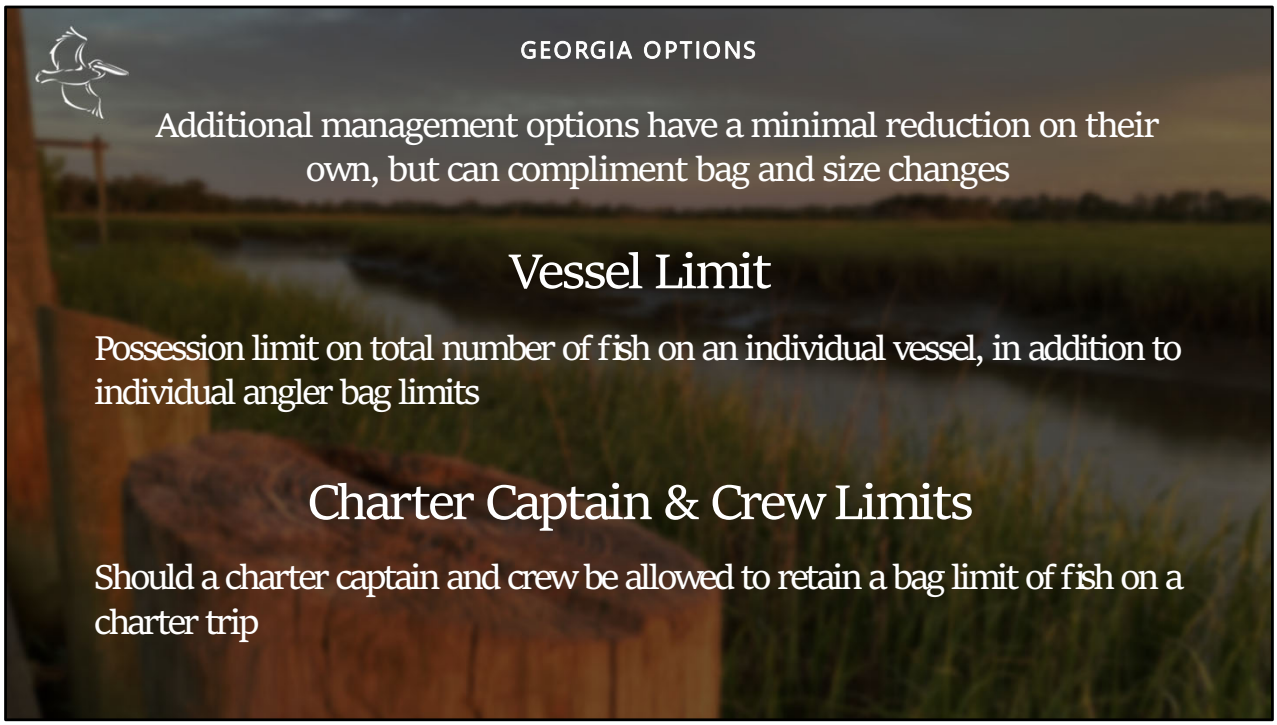
While both of these meet the f 40% criteria, the three fish bag limit is a more conservative option and provides a greater reduction in fishing mortality than the four fish bag limit option.

For the 15 inch options,
- a slot of 15 to 24in and three fish bag limit achieves an f 35% level, and
- a slot of 15 to 24in and the two fish bag achieves an f 40% level.

Finally, maintaining the
- existing slot of 14 to 23in using a two fish bag limit and f 35% level is the result.

For each of these options, the upper end of the slot was adjusted to maintain the nine inch slot width currently in place.

Our catch data suggests that most of the fishing mortality reduction is gained by increasing the lower end of the slot.



In addition to slot and bag limit options, we have a few other potential optionsthat, while on their own, have minimal reduction value, can complement the other regulation changes. Similar regulations for red drum are already in place in other states. First is a vessel limit, a possession limit on total number of fish on an individual vessel in addition to individual angler bag limits. Information from our Dockside Creel survey suggests that these will have a limited effect, but can be important when a lot of individuals are on a boat or during certain times of year when fish are especially abundant. Another potential regulation is charter and captain crew limits. The question here is should a charter captain and crew be allowed to retain a bag limit of fish on their charter trip in addition to their clients? Again, this won't have a large effect on its own, but will affect overall fishing mortality.

Now let's review the regulation change process and what has and will happen. CRD is currently seeking public input about the new regulations. In December 2025, we presented the preliminary regulations options to the Finfish Advisory Panel to seek their feedback. Based on that initial feedback, in early February 2026, we provided the Finfish Advisory Panel our selected proposed options for public input. Now here we are in late February 2026, holding town hall meetings to collect public input into rule development. In early March 2026, CRD will host an online survey to collect public input on regulation development. The deadline to complete the survey is March 12th. In April 2026, we'll brief the DNR board on a proposed rule change. In April and May 2026, we'll send out a final proposal for public comment. After that, the implementation date for all new measures for South Carolina and Georgia is September 1st, 2026.

Thank you for your attention and for supporting science based conservation. Your involvement helps secure a healthy red drum population and sustainable fishing opportunities for years to come. Together, we can protect Georgia's red drum and the traditions that make fishing along our coast so memorable. This presentation was created by Doctor Jared Flowers, Research and Surveys Unit Lead of the Coastal Resources Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. Slide design by Tyler Jones, Public Information Officer, Coastal Resources Division. It was published on February 25th, 2026.