

**Exempted Fishing Permit to Test a State-Based Data Collection and Management System for the
Recreational Harvest of Red Snapper off Georgia in 2026**

PERMIT NUMBER 26-SERO-06

Issued to Georgia Department of Natural Resources

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) issues this exempted fishing permit (EFP) to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GADNR) in accordance with procedures established at 50 CFR 600.745(b). This EFP is valid through December 31, 2026, when signed by NMFS and the authorized representative of GADNR, and becomes effective on the later of the two signature dates. The terms and conditions, and recommendations for executing the EFP are given below.

GADNR is pilot testing a new state-led electronic data collection system during an extended recreational fishing season for red snapper in federal waters of the South Atlantic. GADNR intends the activities conducted under the EFP to improve data on recreational fishing effort, catch, and discards of red snapper, and to inform the development of a long-term state-led management strategy for this recreational fishery.

This EFP allows project participants to recreationally harvest red snapper in South Atlantic federal waters during 2026 consistent with the required terms and conditions below. Participation in this EFP project is open to properly licensed or permitted private anglers and owners or operators of charter vessels or headboats (for-hire fishermen). Failure to comply with the terms and conditions of this EFP may result in the suspension, modification, or termination of the EFP for all project participants.

The outcomes of this EFP project, and similar projects being conducted by the South Carolina and Florida state agencies will inform the need for and refinement of future EFP applications for the recreational harvest of red snapper.

By signing this document, the EFP holder agrees that participants exempt from the specified regulations understand and will comply with the intent and the terms and conditions outlined herein.

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Signature	Date Signed	Signature	Date Signed
Andrew J. Strelcheck		Doug Haymans	
Regional Administrator		Director, Coastal Resources Division	
NMFS Southeast Region		Georgia Department of Natural Resources	

Terms and Conditions

GADNR and participating private anglers and for-hire fishermen must comply with the applicable terms and conditions associated with this EFP, including all harvest, possession, and landing of recreationally caught red snapper in or from South Atlantic federal waters.

GADNR will register all fishermen and vessels to participate, and issue each participating private angler the appropriate state recreational fishing license or permit. GADNR will issue each participating for-hire fisherman the proper state license, and to fish in federal waters, for-hire fishermen must possess a valid federal charter vessel/headboat permit for South Atlantic snapper-grouper.

GADNR will provide a copy of this EFP to all participants and to vessels registered under this EFP. This EFP must be carried on the vessel for which it is issued and must be presented for inspection upon request of any authorized officer.

A participant under this EFP project is limited to landing or possessing recreationally harvested red snapper under the respective EFP only and not in addition to any 2026 federal season for the recreational harvest of South Atlantic red snapper.

TIME AND PLACE WHERE EXEMPTED FISHING CAN OCCUR

Red snapper may be harvested in South Atlantic federal waters from October 9 through 22, 2026. Each fishing trip must begin and end at a landing location in Georgia.

EXEMPTIONS AND FISHING RESTRICTIONS

Unless specifically exempted or required by this EFP, all other federal regulations continue to apply. During the 2026 recreational fishing season only, this EFP exempts participants conforming to these terms and conditions from the following regulations.

- 1) 50 CFR 622.181(c)(2) that limits the harvest and possession of red snapper to the specified season, and applies these limitations to a federally permitted for-hire vessel in both state and federal waters.
- 2) 50 CFR 622.183(b)(5)(i) that specifies when the recreational season will occur each year.
- 3) 50 CFR 622.193(y)(2) that specifies the annual catch limit and accountability measures applicable to the recreational harvest of red snapper.

Under this EFP the following provisions apply.

- The total harvest of red snapper (harvest limit) must not exceed 4,859 fish, which NMFS projects will be harvested within 14 days in October.
- After reviewing landings data for the October season, GADNR will consult with NMFS, as explained further below, to determine if additional fish are available to be harvested during a second season that, if approved, would take place in December 2026.
- The allowable fishing gear is the same as existing federal regulations for the snapper-grouper fishery.
- Properly licensed private anglers and paying anglers on a Federal for-hire vessel can harvest red snapper within the defined season only.
- The daily bag limit per person is one red snapper. The bag limit for a captain or crew on a charter or headboat trip is zero.

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS BY PARTICIPATING FISHERMEN

Participating private anglers, and federally licensed for-hire fishermen must report information related to recreational fishing effort and catch of red snapper.

- GADNR will use the application (app) VESL by Bluefin Data, LLC for electronic data collection.
- Private anglers will use VESL to register as a participant.
- Before a fishing trip occurs, a private angler must use VESL to declare a fishing trip to obtain a trip authorization code specific to that planned trip. The unique trip authorization code will be linked to the trip report and must be available for law enforcement inspection during a trip.
- Each private angler must use VESL to complete and submit a report for each trip, unless GADNR allows an alternate trip participant to submit a report on the angler's behalf.
- The data reported must include the number of red snapper caught, kept, and released, and whether the fish are alive or dead upon release. Other elements could include, but are not limited to, depth fished and fishing time.
- A private angler must use VESL to submit the complete trip report no later than 24 hours after the trip departure time. The eligibility of the same angler to participate further under the EFP is contingent upon submission of the complete trip report, and another fishing trip cannot be initiated or authorized until the completed report is submitted.
- During November, red snapper harvest will not be allowed. However, GADNR will ask participating private anglers to declare all offshore fishing trips and report red snapper discards.
- Federally permitted for-hire fishermen must continue electronic reporting through the federal for-hire data collection program required by 50 CFR 622.176(b).

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION AND PARTNERSHIP COORDINATION

- Upon issuance of the EFPs, GADNR must coordinate with the NMFS Office of Science and Technology (OST) and Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) on implementation of the new VESL survey design.
- GADNR must meet with OST and SEFSC to discuss survey design and estimation methods, implementation protocols, and data storage and sharing. During and after the season, GADNR must document implementation challenges and coordinate with OST and SEFSC to address.
- For 2026, the primary focus is on initial survey development, feasibility testing, and potential benchmarking.¹ Results may not be fully comparable to current certified recreational surveys. It will be the responsibility of GADNR, in collaboration with NMFS and other partners, to clearly communicate the experimental status of data collected and how it will be initially used.

DATA DISSEMINATION AND REPORTING TO NMFS

GADNR must report and make available all collected data under this EFP to NMFS. All data collected under this EFP will be internally stored, managed, and processed securely by GADNR.

- Weekly in-season reporting: Provide NMFS with weekly, unadjusted in-season red snapper landings and discards reported to the VESL app. Reports must be submitted each Tuesday following the reporting week of Monday through Sunday.
- State-led estimation: While OST and SEFSC will provide technical guidance and support, GADNR will be responsible for catch estimation.
- Data sharing: GADNR must coordinate with OST and SEFSC on VESL data access and management. Data must be provided in an agreed upon format for management and access by

¹ When initiating a new data collection system, a benchmarking period of 1 to 3 years is required to evaluate and implement necessary calibrations. This ensures a consistent data time series, which is critical for maintaining the integrity of stock assessments and management decisions ([NMFS procedural directive 04-114-01](#)).

partners and NMFS. This will facilitate analyses related to monitoring survey performance and estimation methods.

- Data reporting: GADNR will report the preliminary results of project activities to NMFS by November 30, 2026. The contents of the report must include, but are not limited to, the number of unique private anglers, Federal for-hire fishermen, vessels, and fishing trips, number of reported red snapper landed and discarded by week, compliance rates, and other collected information. After reviewing the data and other information, NMFS and GADNR will jointly determine if a second season may take place in December 2026. If a December season is authorized, NMFS will provide written concurrence to GADNR.
- By January 31, 2027, GADNR staff will meet with NMFS staff to discuss outcomes of this EFP and how GADNR can incorporate improvements to activities under a future EFP.
- A final report of activities conducted under this EFP during 2026 must be submitted to NMFS by February 28, 2027. In addition to the information provided in the progress report, GADNR must include in the final report how project goals were or were not achieved, lessons learned, and suggested improvements to enhance data collection, reporting, and future management.

ENFORCEMENT

GADNR must ensure each participant complies with these terms and conditions, and project-specific requirements through a combination of land-based and at-sea monitoring. GADNR will verify participants and vessels under this EFP through the appropriate state license and/or federal permit, a copy of this EFP, and any other required documentation, such as a trip authorization code.

Participants under this EFP harvesting red snapper outside the season, or otherwise not in compliance with these terms and conditions, will be considered in violation of this EFP.

SANCTIONS

Failure of GADNR or any participant to comply with the terms and conditions of this EFP, any notice issued under 50 CFR part 600, any other applicable provision of 50 CFR parts 600 and 622, the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act, Act), or any other regulations promulgated thereunder, may be grounds for revocation, suspension, or modification of this EFP pursuant to 50 CFR 600.745(b)(9). Anyone in violation of the terms and conditions of this EFP or the Magnuson-Stevens Act may be subject to civil or criminal penalties under the Act.

Recommendations

NMFS encourages GADNR to consider further actions and activities aimed at enhancing the accuracy and precision of data collection, and reducing discards and discard mortality of red snapper. NMFS intends these recommendations to increase project robustness and provide valuable input for the development of a long-term state-led management strategy for the recreational red snapper fishery. Please consider them before beginning data collection in 2026.

- Intercept-based probability sampling: A probability-based, dockside survey should be conducted as an integral part of a statistically valid capture-recapture estimator. Universal trip identifiers should be used during the survey to guarantee accurate trip matching.
- Catch information collected through VESL should be compatible and comparable with NMFS' Access Point Angler Intercept Survey information on fish size, counts, and disposition.

- Monitor compliance and establish a baseline: Recognizing that this is an experimental year for feasibility testing, state compliance monitoring should evaluate the reliability of the new methodology. Methods should incorporate elements that allow meaningful compliance monitoring such as a way to flag reports that were made after an intercept. This will facilitate comparison between intercepted and non-intercepted trips.
- Cross-state coordination and consistency: To the extent possible, GADNR and South Carolina should maintain a consistency in the data collection designs, data definitions, and reporting intervals. Coordinating these technical standards will be essential for benchmarking and comparing results across state lines during this experimental phase and also maximize utility of the data for regional stock assessments.
- Promote best fishing practices, such as how to release fish exhibiting barotrauma, through education and outreach to participants. For example, <https://safmc.net/best-fishing-practices> and <https://safmc.net/posts/using-best-fishing-practices-when-heading-offshore-an-faq>.