



# SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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## *News Release*

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### **Council Requests Allowing Harvest of Red Snapper in 2017 and 2018**

Members of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council voted today to approve a request to NOAA Fisheries that would allow fishermen access to red snapper in federal waters in the South Atlantic beginning in mid-to late October this year. If approved by NOAA Fisheries, it will be the first time since 2014 that the red snapper fishery has been open in federal waters off the coasts of the Carolinas, Georgia, and the east coast of Florida. The Council is requesting that NOAA Fisheries allow an interim annual catch limit (recreational and commercial) of 42,510 fish for 2017 via an emergency rule. The annual catch limit would allow for a recreational mini-season likely beginning the end of October, with approximately 6 to 12 days of fishing over a period of 3-day weekends. The recreational bag limit would be 1 fish per person/day with no minimum size limit. Commercial harvest would be allowed with a 75-pound trip limit. The recreational sector is allocated 71.93% of the total catch limit. If the Council's request is approved, the number of days and specific dates of the recreational mini-season will be determined by NOAA Fisheries. A decision is expected in the coming weeks and will be announced by NOAA Fisheries.

In addition to the emergency rule request to allow an opening this year, the Council also approved measures in Amendment 43 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan with the intent to have a red snapper season in 2018. The amendment would revise the process to calculate the annual catch limit for red snapper, allowing mini-seasons for red snapper beginning in July. If allowed, the recreational fishery would open the second Friday in July (July 13, 2018) and the commercial fishery the second Monday in July (July 9, 2018). The annual opening dates for the fishery were established through an earlier amendment.

Under the Council's approved preferred alternative, the 2018 annual catch limit would also be 42,510 fish. Because fishing pressure would be greater during the summer months in most areas, it is estimated that the recreational mini-season would last between 4 to 7 weekend days with a 1 fish per person/day bag limit and no minimum size limit. The commercial trip limit would remain at 75 pounds. The number of recreational fishing days would be determined by NOAA Fisheries and announced prior to the July opening. The Secretary of Commerce must approve Amendment 43 before it is implemented.

There was much discussion on various management alternatives as Council members reviewed public input. Public hearings on Amendment 43 were held in August and over 230 written public comments were recently received on both the emergency rule request and Amendment 43. Public comment was also taken during today's meeting. "We've consistently heard from our constituents about the increasing number of red snapper encountered and concerns that harvest has been prohibited for the past four years," said Council Chair, Dr. Michelle Duval. "The majority of comments support allowing a limited harvest of red snapper."

The Council's decision to move forward with options to establish an interim annual catch limit and allow limited harvest of red snapper was based in part on the public testimony and support. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee had recommended acceptable biological catch levels for red snapper following a 2017 stock assessment using both landings and estimated discards. Annual catch limits are based on those recommended catch levels. However, NOAA Fisheries later stated that using recreational discard estimates is likely ineffective for monitoring red snapper removals due to uncertainty in the estimates of discards. This inhibits the ability to set an acceptable biological catch that can be effectively monitored. In addition, the Council considered increases in the numbers of red snapper observed through a long-term scientific survey using fish traps.

*(Continued)*

## **Red Snapper Harvest (*continued*)**

Council members also noted the positive social and economic benefits of allowing mini-seasons beginning this year, especially on the heels of recent damage to fishing communities by Hurricane Irma.

State agency personnel will work diligently to collect information from fishermen if harvest is allowed. Personnel will be stationed at boat ramps, marinas, and other locations to gather data, similar to data collected during the 2012-2014 mini-seasons. “The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Fish and Wildlife Research Institute will be conducting surveys of private recreational anglers and charter-for-hire crew,” explained Jessica McCawley, Council representative for FWC. “Additionally, biologists will be collecting tissue samples (ear bones and gonad samples) to evaluate the sizes, ages, and reproductive condition of the fish being harvested.” Council members noted that additional data collected during the mini-seasons would be useful in future management decisions.

Private recreational fishermen will also have an opportunity to report their catch information as part of a voluntary pilot project using the mobile iAngler tournament app. The free mobile app will allow fishermen to report their landings of red snapper, the number of fish released, depths fished, and other valuable information. Additional details will be publicized from the Council office as they become available.

“It is important for fishermen to remember that this is their red snapper resource,” explained Dr. Duval. “It is imperative that fishermen do everything possible to minimize the number of red snapper released during the season openings and use best fishing practices to improve the survival of released fish. Anglers are encouraged to move away from area populations after catching their bag limit and to use descending devices to reduce the impacts of barotrauma, especially when fishing in depths over 100 feet.” Dr. Duval also noted the rate of harvest in 2017 will determine the length of the 2018 red snapper season. “We must be cautionary in balancing access to the fishery without negatively impacting the sacrifices made thus far as this important stock continues to rebuild.”

The Council will continue its meeting this week through Friday. Additional meeting information is available at: <http://safmc.net/2017-september-council-meeting/>.

**The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils, conserves and manages fish stocks from three to 200 miles offshore of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and east Florida.**