



November 10, 2025

JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

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

Dear Secretary Lutnick:

Please find attached an application for a South Atlantic Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) from the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries for your consideration.

Under the EFP, North Carolina will begin work to develop a new state data collection system. Working with anglers, this new state data collection system will provide needed insight into the abundance of red snapper off our coast. This data will help us better understand the fishery and support better management decisions. Additionally, this will provide a platform for enhanced coordination with our counterparts in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina on their respective efforts on red snapper.

We ask that our EFP be approved as quickly as possible, so we can begin our education and preparation efforts for the 2026 fishing season.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and we look forward to working with you and answering any questions you have.

Sincerely,

Kathy B. Rawls
NC Division of Marine Fisheries Director

cc: Patricia Murphey
Executive Assistant for Councils



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- i. November 10, 2025
- ii. **Applicant:** Kathy B. Rawls, Director
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- iii. **Purpose and Goal:**
Request that an Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) be issued to NC Division of Marine Fisheries (NCDMF) to develop, implement, and test a pilot state data collection program with the long-term intent to implement state management of Atlantic red snapper. This EFP may be requested annually for up to three years, with the focus of improving NC's ability to develop a defined Atlantic red snapper sampling frame, improve fishery-dependent recreational data collection, and to better understand angler behavior. This EFP will include a limited number of private recreational anglers and state-licensed for-hire operators that also possess federal permits for snapper grouper species. North Carolina is working in cooperation with South Carolina, Georgia and east coast Florida, in development of EFPs to improve data collection to better inform recreational management of Atlantic red snapper.

Justification for Issuance of an EFP

Effective management of the Atlantic red snapper fishery faces several challenges, including rising discard rates, the resultant truncated season, and a lack of adequate snapper-specific data. The issuance of an EFP will allow NC to test a pilot data collection program to capture both landings and discard information, compare results with the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), and improve our understanding of angler behavior.

The SouthEast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) 73 completed in 2021 indicated the Atlantic red snapper population was overfished and that overfishing was occurring.



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However, an update to SEDAR 73 (2024) indicated that the stock is no longer overfished and is progressing toward being rebuilt with higher-than-expected recruitment during 2014-2021. Although not yet fully rebuilt, results of the last four stock assessments have shown a strong rebuilding trajectory. Secretarial Amendment 59 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan (2024) reported the Atlantic red snapper to not be overfished and based on the new proxy, overfishing is no longer occurring.

Despite these positive trends, fishing seasons have become shorter, with the high numbers of discards identified as the key issue. The current total Annual Catch Limit (ACL) is 509,000 fish, of which 475,000 fish are counted as dead discards. This **allows for only 6.7% of the total ACL to be harvested**. The 2025 recreational fishing season was open for two days (July 11-12) and was based on a recreational ACL of 22,797 fish (4.5% of the total ACL).

Recreational anglers are frustrated with MRIP data collection and have voiced their frustrations at council meetings, advisory panel meetings, and through news and social media. For example, North Carolina Atlantic red snapper MRIP estimates are poor quality with percent standard errors (PSE) ranging from 127.5 (1984) to 39.2 (2011) with only one year, 2021 (27.4) meeting the <30 threshold for a precise estimate. Also, MRIP is not designed for in season monitoring because the base interval is a two-month wave and is especially problematic for mini seasons for Atlantic red snapper. Thus, an additional data collection program capable of collecting more real time data is needed for effective monitoring of the recreational harvest and discards in the Atlantic red snapper fishery.

Anglers have similarly voiced their frustrations with the mini recreational season or “derby” fishery (i.e. “brief duration during which fishers race to take as much catch as they can before the fishery closes”, - NOAA Glossary). These short seasons not only decrease economic benefits to coastal communities that rely on recreational fishing, but they also frustrate anglers who choose to engage in unnecessarily risky fishing practices such as fishing during poor weather conditions. These derby seasons are the result of having to manage around discards of Atlantic red snapper that make up the majority of the recreational ACL.

Topping, et al. (2019) compared private recreational fishing harvest and effort in the Gulf of Mexico between a derby season and an extended season. In 2017, the Gulf red snapper season was a three-day long derby season. After discussions among agencies and congressional offices, NOAA Fisheries re-opened the season for an additional 39 days. This allowed an opportunity for Topping, et al. (2019) to examine angler behavior in each scenario. Daily catch and effort rates were compared between both seasons as well as



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weather impacts on fishing effort. Daily harvest and effort were significantly higher during the derby season compared to the extended season and were a function of extended season length and weather. They also found that harvest and effort rates did not increase proportionally with season length.

North Carolina, along with the other south Atlantic states, is requesting an EFP that will run simultaneously with the development of an Amendment to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region.

Methodology:

This EFP will allow NCDMF to:

1. Pilot test a state-based recreational data collection and monitoring application to collect near-real-time harvest estimates of Atlantic red snapper (*Lutjanus campechanus*) in North Carolina's adjacent federal waters.
2. Compare reporting results of landings and discards between the reporting application and MRIP.
3. Compare daily fishing times, landings, and discards between mini seasons and the proposed 62-day season.
4. Collect biological information of Atlantic red snapper off North Carolina through its Carcass Collection Program.
5. Collect demographic, social and economic data through surveys of private recreational fishermen fishing for Atlantic red snapper in North Carolina.

Under this EFP, 100 private recreational and federally permitted for-hire anglers will be allowed to harvest one Atlantic red snapper per person per day for the length of an MRIP wave from federal waters off North Carolina. The captain and crew will be excluded from possessing a bag limit of red snapper. This timeframe coincides with the MRIP base interval and will allow for a data comparison with MRIP.

Private recreational anglers will be required to hold either an annual or lifetime NC Coastal Recreational Fishing License (CRFL). For-hire guides will need to hold either a NC Blanket Vessel CRFL or a NC For-Hire Captains CRFL and a South Atlantic Charter/Headboat Permit. Both sectors will be required to apply for participation as data collectors on a NC Scientific or Educational Activity Permit (SEAP) to participate on the EFP and acknowledge the understanding that reporting requirements are mandatory for any red snapper targeted or incidentally caught.



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A SEAP is required for conducting scientific or educational activities utilizing marine and estuarine resources. This permit applies only to marine and estuarine resources in North Carolina coastal fishing waters under N.C. General Statutes and the rules of the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission. Each angler listed on the SEAP will be required to call or email NCDMF no later than 24 hours prior to use of the permit, specifying Atlantic red snapper fishing activity and location. Private recreational anglers will also be required to declare a fishing trip in the data collection application, no earlier than five days prior to the start of a trip to receive a trip authorization code linked to each trip. Anglers will have the ability to cancel the trip authorization should they encounter an issue (e.g. inclement weather or mechanical issues). Lastly, the trip authorization code will be directly linked to the post-trip mandatory reporting requirement, which must be completed within 24 hours from trip departure time. Any trip authorization and mandatory report must be completed and submitted prior to the initiation of a new trip with a unique authorization code.

For-hire captains will also be required to call or email NCDMF to specify Atlantic red snapper fishing activity and location but will not be required to report through the application. For-hire captains are currently required to report trip information through the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting (SEFHIER) program and through the Southeast Region Headboat Survey. Data from these programs are available through Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program. To prevent false inflation of new entrants, for-hire vessels must have possessed both a NC DMF for-hire license and a valid South Atlantic Charter/Headboat permit for Snapper Grouper prior to January 1, 2026.

The NCDMF Director has proclamation authority to implement management measures to comply with the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region. The recreational snapper grouper proclamation may be amended to address possession and reporting requirements for the EFP.”

Outreach materials will be created and distributed to announce the opportunity to participate, how to apply, and to relay to recreational anglers and the for-hire fleet information about the EFP and reporting requirements that these anglers must submit to participate as a participant on the SEAP.

Data variables:

Information to be collected through the state survey program’s application:

- a. **Prior to fishing:** Name and contact of registered angler (login will be email)/ Trip number / Trip date / Trip start time / Landing County and site / Vessel registration number or US Coast Guard Documentation number



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- 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

A unique trip identification will be created for each fishing trip, and a new trip cannot be initiated without the prior trip's complete and submitted report. Reporting will be mandatory, however the decision to indicate which of the above fields will be mandatory when implemented is still under consideration. The number of Atlantic red snapper landed and discarded on the fishing trip will be a required field.

Validation of trips will occur through angler intercept interviews conducted by NCDMF staff at saltwater access points. Staff will attempt to collect trip authorization codes, vessel registration number, number of anglers, hours fished, and number of fish released and retained.

Anglers will be encouraged to provide Atlantic red snapper carcasses through the NC Carcass Collection Program. This is a statewide program where carcasses of finfish are donated by recreational anglers. The division has placed freezers at designated sites across coastal areas to allow anglers to donate fileted fish carcasses. Red snapper carcasses will be collected to provide length, age, and sex data. Incentives will be used to encourage donations of red snapper carcasses. Anglers will fill out catch cards with the trip identifier, date, and other information required when donating carcasses. Dependent on availability and capacity, NCDMF staff will coordinate with anglers for placement of coolers for ease of carcass collection as well as meet anglers at the dock to collect biological samples.

Mail Survey

Contact information collected through the SEAP application process will be used to survey participants through email. Information collected through the survey will include demographic information, social and economic information and trip satisfaction information.

iv. Documentation required for vessels covered by the EFP

- (A) USCG documentation, state license, or registration of each vessel, or the information contained on the appropriate document
- (B) The current name, address, and telephone number of the owner and master, if not included on the document provided for the vessel



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NC DMF will provide a list of documentation and contact information for anglers, captains, and vessels through the application process to participate as an angler on the SEAP to NOAA Fisheries prior to the start of the pilot program.

v. Targeted species expected to be harvested under the EFP, the amount, arrangements of disposition, and anticipated impacts on the environment, fisheries, marine mammals, threatened or endangered species, and EFH.

The target species to be harvested under this EFP is Atlantic red snapper (*Lutjanus campechanus*). North Carolina, for this first year, is requesting to allow the resulting harvest to be equal to what is harvested by the 100 private anglers and for-hire captains and is requesting that this harvest be exempted from the recreational ACL. Harvest from this EFP will help inform future EFP requests for 2027 and 2028. One Atlantic red snapper per person per day may be harvested with no size limit. Other snapper and grouper species are expected to be incidentally caught but will not be covered under this EFP. Participants will be required to follow current fishing seasons, size and bag limits established by state and federal regulations. Biological information will be provided through the carcass collection program. Atlantic red snapper that are discarded by participants will be required to be discarded using a descending device or a venting tool, and number of discards will be recorded.

No significant impact on the Atlantic red snapper population is expected. The Atlantic red snapper is rebuilding faster than anticipated and overfishing is no longer occurring. Although the EFP may increase the number of trips specifically targeting and retaining Atlantic red snapper per person by these 100 participants, it is not expected to increase the overall amount of recreational fishing trips not targeting Atlantic red snapper in federal waters off North Carolina. In the absence of an EFP, fish would be regulatorily discarded and less likely to survive because of higher water temperatures and reduced dissolved oxygen concentration. By allowing retention of Atlantic red snapper that would have otherwise been discarded, the requested EFP may reduce discards while providing 100 anglers with more opportunities for harvest.

No significant impact on the environment, marine mammals, threatened or endangered species or EFH is expected since recreational fishing has and will continue to occur regardless of Atlantic red snapper harvest.

vi. Time and place fishing will take place and gear to be used.

The time period requested for this EFP is July 1, 2026, through August 31, 2026, which corresponds with MRIP wave four to be able to directly compare past mini seasons to the



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longer season through time. The gear will be allowable hook and line gear consistent with current regulations.

vii. Specific regulations for which an exemption is being requested

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 ACLs, annual catch targets (ACTs), and 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.

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.

viii Signature of applicants

Kathy B. Rawls
NC Division of Marine Fisheries Director

Patricia Murphey
Executive Assistant for Councils

ix. Literature Cited

NMFS Fisheries. 2025. Secretarial Amendment 59 to the Fisheries Management Plan for Snapper Grouper, National Marine Fisheries Service, Southeast Region, 263 13th Ave S., St. Petersburg, FL, 33701.



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SEDAR. 2024. SEDAR 73 Update of South Atlantic Red Snapper Stock Assessment Report. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 131 pp. <http://sedarweb.org/sedar-73>

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.