



March 9, 2026

The Honorable Howard Lutnick
Secretary of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Lutnick:

On behalf of America's 15.1 million marine recreational anglers, we appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Exempted Fishing Permits (EFP) applications submitted by Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina for Atlantic red snapper.

South Atlantic red snapper is a conservation success story to be celebrated. The stock is not overfished and is not undergoing overfishing. In fact, it is the healthiest it has been in decades. Anglers and fisheries managers alike recognize how far this fishery has come.

Yet despite that progress, recreational access has remained extremely limited. In recent years, federal seasons have been measured in days, including just a two-day season in 2025. For anglers, that does not reflect the reality of abundance they are seeing on the water.

For nearly 20 years, South Atlantic red snapper management has struggled to keep pace with the rebuilding of the stock. Instead, as abundance increased, seasons became shorter and more restrictive. Proposals were advanced to close all bottom fishing in huge areas of the Atlantic Ocean to prevent red snapper interactions, even incidental ones. Federal "solutions" like these left anglers frustrated and weakened confidence in the federal management system.

The EFP proposals from the four states offer a practical and responsible way forward. Each state presents the pathway best suited to fulfill conservation and management requirements for their state. Florida demonstrates long-running experience in the Gulf of America with data collection in the snapper/grouper fishery and state management across the board; their experience shows that improved recreational reporting and state-designed seasons work in real life. Georgia's attention to their coastal fishery and agency-stakeholder collaboration provide the streamlined

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runway for data gathering, effort monitoring and enforcement. South Carolina's focus has built a workable, science-forward framework that reflects angler behavior and reduces waste, while strengthening compliance through clearer, more predictable management. North Carolina's diverse recreational and charter/for-hire sectors add breadth to the pilot and underscore the need for regionally tailored management.

The States have clearly invested time, talent and treasure to coordinate their plans to implement these pilot programs. Cooperative federalism works.

President Trump signed the Modern Fish Act into law in 2018. The law recognizes that recreational and commercial fisheries are different endeavors and should be managed differently. Section 102 authorizes the use of alternative measures to manage recreational fisheries. No longer does NOAA have only one tool – pounds of dead fish on a dock – to manage America's vast and diverse fisheries. NOAA is statutorily authorized to use other tools in the fishery management toolbox to manage recreational fisheries, i.e. harvest control rules, extraction rates, fishing mortality targets, and others.

Under the proposed EFPs, harvest would remain constrained by various tools, like size and creel limits, and other controls that apply across state and federal waters. NOAA would maintain oversight, and conservation standards remain in place. What would change is the opportunity to test state data systems designed specifically for this fishery and evaluate whether they can produce more accurate and timely information.

This effort reflects years of work by state agencies, governors, attorneys general, Members of Congress and stakeholders throughout the region. Dedicated federal funding has been provided by the Congress to support these pilots and help the states which are prepared to implement them responsibly.

The EFPs represent cooperative federalism at its best. Federal conservation goals remain intact. Scientific integrity remains central. At the same time, states are given the opportunity to use tools that better match the realities of their fisheries while working in partnership with NOAA.

If approved, the EFPs would allow longer but still carefully controlled recreational seasons in 2026, ranging from 39 to 62 days depending on the state. These seasons would remain structured and accountable. And they would better reflect the health of the stock and provide a meaningful opportunity to inform future management and systems.

Recreational fishing supports coastal communities across the South Atlantic and is an important part of the region's culture and economy. But a central issue here is whether management tools are keeping pace with both conservation success and congressional intent.

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We respectfully urge the Department of Commerce to approve the four state EFP applications in a timely manner and to continue working closely with NOAA Fisheries, state agencies and stakeholders as these pilots move forward.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your continued leadership.

Sincerely,

Heather Lougheed, President
BoatU.S.

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