



JOSH STEIN
Governor

D. REID WILSON
Secretary

KATHY B. RAWLS
Director

February 17, 2025

MEMORANDUM

TO: North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission

FROM: Lucas Pensinger and Melinda Lambert
Spotted Seatrout Species Co-Leads

SUBJECT: January & February 2026 Cold Stun

Issue

The Division of Marine Fisheries (the Division) began receiving reports of cold stunned spotted seatrout on January 27, 2026, following five out of seven nights of below freezing temperatures and continued to receive additional cold stun reports through at least the draft date of this memo.

Background

By February 4, 2026, coastal North Carolina had received 10+ inches of snowfall and was experiencing sustained cold temperatures. The Division had received reports of 19 distinct cold stun events from the Little Alligator River (Tyrrell County) to the Lockwood Folly River (Brunswick County). Division staff responded to and confirmed multiple cold stuns of spotted seatrout, red drum, striped mullet, and menhaden across this range.

Discussion

The Division Director issued Proclamation [FF-12-2026](#) on February 4, 2026, to close the commercial and recreational spotted seatrout fishery in Coastal and Joint Fishing Waters effective at 4:00 p.m. on February 6, 2026 extending to 11:59 p.m. on June 30, 2025 unless the reopening date is modified under the cold stun adaptive management provisions of Amendment 1 to the Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan. The closure follows the Marine Fisheries Commission's (MFC) management strategy in [Amendment 1](#) to the Spotted Seatrout Fishery Management Plan.

With an extended cold period and significant snow and ice melt causing cold water runoff in most areas of coastal N.C. after the fishery closure, the potential of fish to succumb to low water temperatures existed for weeks following the closure. The significant snowfall and extended period of cold weather also made it difficult for Division staff to safely investigate early cold stun reports or independently investigate

known areas of spotted seatrout winter habitat. Additionally, the types of early reports received from the public – primarily reports from people living on coastal waterways – indicated the public may have been similarly limited in the early stages of the cold stun event. These limitations could indicate that the reports the Division received and confirmed as well as the independent investigations Division staff conducted represent only a fraction of the scope of this cold stun event. Since Proclamation FF-12-2026 was issued, the Division received 17 additional reports of cold stunned spotted seatrout. Staff have confirmed cold stuns of thousands of spotted seatrout, 10s of thousands of striped mullet, hundreds of red drum, hundreds of menhaden, some southern flounder, and a few sheepshead from the Little Alligator River to Surf City. As of the drafting of this memo, Division staff have downloaded water temperature data from 36 water temperature loggers across 26 stations. Seven stations showed temperature profiles consistent with loggers coming out of the water. The remaining loggers (26) all recorded water temperatures below the 3°C threshold for over 24-consecutive hours with 14 of these loggers also recording water temperatures below the 5°C threshold for over eight consecutive days. Staff are continuing to actively investigate reports of cold stuns and collect biological and environmental data from areas affected.