SCOPING DOCUMENT

RED DRUM FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN REVIEW

Scoping Period October 1–30, 2026



The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries seeks your input on Red Drum Management

North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality
North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries
3441 Arendell Street
P.O. Box 769
Morehead City, NC 28557

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RED DRUM LEADS

For questions about Red Drum biology, life history, and management, please contact:

Cara Kowalchyk
Washington
Cara.Kowalchyk@deq.nc.gov
252-948-3875

Melinda Lambert
Manteo
Melinda.Lambert@deq.nc.gov
252-423-5266

FMP COORDINATORS

For questions related to FMP development, please contact:

Daniel Zapf
Morehead City
Daniel.Zapf@deq.nc.gov
252-515-5542

Jeffrey Dobbs
Morehead City
Jeffrey.Dobbs@deq.nc.gov
252-515-56

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SCAN TO VIEW RED DRUM SCOPING INFORMATION AND PRESENTATION

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Red Drum is North Carolina's state saltwater fish and is also known as Channel Bass, Puppy Drum, Bull Drum, and Redfish. Red Drum can grow to five feet long and weigh up to 100 pounds. In North Carolina, the maximum observed age is 62. Red Drum inhabit coastal and estuarine waters from Massachusetts to Key West, Florida, and throughout the Gulf of Mexico. Red Drum typically reach sexual maturity around age 3 to 5, when they are generally greater than 32 inches total length.

IMPORTANT TERMS

Bycatch – The incidental capture of non-target marine life, including unmarketable fish or juvenile fish of target species due to a direct encounter with fishing vessels and gear. This unintended catch is often discarded, frequently injured or dead.

Catch Cap – The maximum limit on the total amount (or weight) of a specific species that can be commercially harvested/removed from an ecosystem in a given season. Once the cap is reached, the fishery closes.

Dead Discards – Fish that are not kept upon being brought to the boat, and are either dead at the time of release or are a proportion of those fish released alive that later die due to injury, stress, etc.

Stock – Population of fish that live in same geographic area and mix enough to spawn when mature.

Stock Assessment – Process using biological and statistical information to determine changes in stock abundance over time. Determines stock status.

Overfishing – Removing too many fish each year.

Overfished – Population is too small to sustain itself.

Fishery Management Plan (FMP) – Document that guides management of a fishery to ensure long-term sustainability.

- Management strategies and management measures enacted under an FMP are done through **Amendments**, **Supplements**, or **Revisions** dependent on the issue being addressed. Management can be implemented to address changes in stock status, new scientific information, or changing stakeholder needs.
- An **Information Update** incorporates changes in factual and background data that do not alter management strategies or management measures and does not introduce or address new management issues.

Management Strategy – Adopted to help reach the goal and objectives of the plan. They are the sum of all the management measures selected to achieve the biological, ecological, economic, and social objectives of the fishery.

Management Measure – The actions implemented to help control the fishery as stipulated in the management strategies.

Adaptive Management – A structured decision-making process when uncertainty exists, with the objective of reducing uncertainty through time with monitoring. Provides flexibility to incorporate new information and accommodate alternative and/or additional actions.

SCOPING DOCUMENT

The North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) wants your input on review of the Red Drum Fishery Management Plan (FMP).

PURPOSE OF SCOPING

The scheduled 5-year comprehensive review of the North Carolina Red Drum FMP began in 2025. Originally the review was set to begin in 2024, but the DMF requested, and the DEQ secretary approved, a one-year delay to align review of the state plan with adoption of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (ASMFC's) Addendum II to Amendment 2 to the Interstate FMP for Red Drum. The scoping period provides the public with an opportunity to provide input about stock and fishery issues and the potential need for management changes.

This document provides background information about Red Drum management and identifies potential issues and topics for discussion. Scoping is the first and best opportunity to make suggestions about what management strategies should be considered during review of the North Carolina Red Drum FMP.

Specific management options have not been developed. After reviewing public comments received during the scoping process, the DMF will recommend whether to pursue an **Information Update**, where no management changes are made, or an **Amendment**, where management changes are proposed for adoption by the Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC). During the FMP review, only management strategies that maintain compliance with the ASMFC requirements for Red Drum will be considered.

The questions presented in this document are **NOT** intended to limit the scope of ideas or comments but may provide guidance to start discussion and develop ideas. **The Division wants to hear about your experiences in the Red Drum fishery and ideas for improving management.**

WHAT IS SCOPING?

Scoping is the first stage of the FMP review process. Scoping serves to:

1. Provide notice to the public that formal review of the FMP is underway.
2. Inform the public of the stock status, when available.
3. Solicit input on relevant management strategies and issues to be addressed.
4. Recruit potential FMP advisory committee (AC) members to assist the Division in drafting the plan.

SCOPING PERIOD

October 1, 2026–October 30, 2026

SCOPING DOCUMENT

SCOPING MEETINGS

DMF will hold four scoping meeting (dates, times, and locations in table below), one of which will also provide the opportunity for online participation. At each scoping meeting, DMF staff will be available to provide information, answer questions, and solicit feedback about Red Drum science, data collection, and management in North Carolina. There will be a presentation followed by a formal comment session. Following the comment session, DMF staff will be available for participants to further discuss issues and attendees are encouraged to communicate and share ideas with DMF staff.

Tuesday October 13, 2026 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Cape Fear Community College 502 N. Front Street Room U 528 Wilmington, NC 28401	**Thursday October 15, 2026** 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. NCSU Mckinnon Conference Center 1101 Gorman Street Raleigh, NC 27606 Room 9 This meeting will have a virtual option
Tuesday October 20, 2026 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Craven Community College 800 College Court Room AMC 102 New Bern, NC 28562	**Thursday October 22, 2026** 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. College of the Albemarle 205 US-64 Room 110 Manteo, NC 27954

HOW TO COMMENT

During the comment period, the public are encouraged to provide comments in person at the public scoping meeting or in writing. Written comments may also be submitted online or through U.S. Mail. All written comments must be received or postmarked by 11:59 pm on Saturday, October 30, 2026. You may submit written comments through one of the following methods:

1. Online at: Red Drum Scoping Comments
2. U.S. Mail to:

N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries
Red Drum Scoping
P.O. Box 769
Morehead City, N.C. 28557

All comments, regardless of submission method, will be considered by the DMF during FMP review.

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STOCK STATUS

Early stock assessments,1996-2007, found the Red Drum stock in the Northern Region (North Carolina through New Jersey) to be either experiencing overfishing or overfished based on available assessment methodologies. Since North Carolina implemented its original Red Drum Fishery Management Plan (FMP) in 2001, management measures have been effective, and the stock has improved to acceptable levels.

The most recent stock assessment, approved by the ASMFC for management use in October 2024, found the Northern Stock is not overfished and is not experiencing overfishing. The Northern Stock was evaluated using a Traffic Light Analysis (TLA), which relies heavily on the long-term data collected by North Carolina (2024 Benchmark Red Drum Stock Assessment). Despite the positive stock status determination for the Northern Stock in the last year of the assessment (2021), fishing mortality rates have been increasing and are approaching the fishing mortality threshold. **The ASMFC stock assessment noted that the increase in fishing mortality during the terminal years of the assessment was likely driven by increased Red Drum harvest in Virginia and Maryland (Figure 1).**

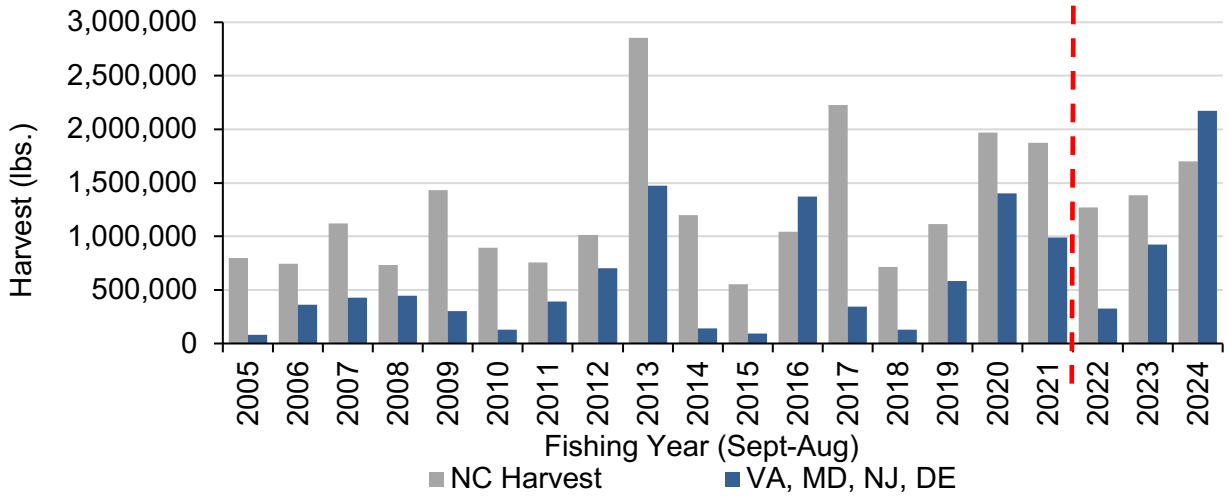


Figure 1. Red Drum Northern Stock harvest in pounds by fishing year, 2005–2024. Harvest totals include both commercial and recreational landings. Red dashed line represents the terminal year of the Red Drum Benchmark Stock Assessment (2021).

ASMFC ADDENDUM II AND NORTHERN REGION MANAGEMENT

Management Options Considered

Draft Addendum II, released for public comment in August 2025, included three alternative recreational management options for the Northern Region: (A) status quo; (B) matching regulations across Maryland, the Potomac River Fisheries Commission, and Virginia; and (C) modifying the existing slot-size limits in North Carolina (Addendum II for Public Comment).

Management measures specific to North Carolina proposed in Option C included reducing the maximum size limit to 26 inches TL, with the option for the Board to further adjust either the minimum or maximum slot size between 18 and 26 inches. The recreational bag limit in North Carolina would remain at one fish per person per day. The proposed North Carolina measures were estimated to reduce state-level recreational removals (harvest + dead discards) by 3–11%.

Public Comment on North Carolina Measures

During public comment, specifically for Option C, most commenters supported maintaining the status quo and emphasized the need for additional public input before implementing North Carolina-specific management measures, particularly because North Carolina's current regulations are already substantially more restrictive than those of other states in the Northern Stock. Commenters also noted that available information did not indicate concerns with the Northern Stock or provide sufficient evidence to support additional management changes in the state.

Final ASMFC Action

ASMFC adopted Addendum II in October 2025 with Option B for the Northern Region, standardizing recreational regulations across Maryland, the Potomac River Fisheries Commission, and Virginia at a three-fish bag limit and an 18–26 inch TL slot limit, effective September 1, 2026 (Table 1). **The resulting reduction in recreational removals for the Northern Stock is unknown, although the measures are expected to result in minor reductions in fishing mortality.** ASMFC focused management changes on Maryland and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission (Virginia's regulations did not change), where increased Red Drum harvest was identified as a likely contributor to concerning trends. **The final ASMFC action on Addendum II does not require North Carolina to modify current management.**

Table 1. Red Drum recreational and commercial fishery regulations for the Northern Stock by state since 2014. Slot size in inches total length (TL).

Fishery	North Carolina	Virginia	Maryland	Delaware	New Jersey	Potomac River
Commercial	7 fish bycatch; 18–27"	5 fish bycatch; 18–25"	5 fish bycatch; 18–25"	N/A	N/A	N/A
Recreational	1 fish; 18–27"	3 fish; 18–26"	1 fish; 18–27"	5 fish; 20–27"	1 fish; 18–27"	5 fish; 18–25"
Addendum II (2026)	No change	No change	**3 fish; 18–26"**	No change	No change	**3 fish; 18–26"**

CURRENT MANAGEMENT – NORTH CAROLINA

Red Drum in North Carolina are jointly managed under Amendment 1 to the North Carolina Red Drum FMP and the ASMFC's Addendum II to Amendment 2 to the Interstate FMP for Red Drum. The ASMFC FMP for Red Drum requires states to implement recreational creel and size limits to

achieve the fishing mortality target (F40%), including a maximum size limit of 27 inches TL, and maintaining existing commercial regulations.

Red Drum in Coastal Fishing Waters of North Carolina are managed with rules as adopted by the N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission (MFC). The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC) is responsible for regulating Red Drum in Inland Fishing Waters (those waters and tributaries that are upstream of coastal fishing waters).

Recreational Fishery

Current management strategies in place for the recreational Red Drum fishery in Inland and Coastal Fishing Waters are one fish, 18–27 inches TL, per person per day. From July 1 through September 30, 7pm–7am, in the internal Coastal Waters of Pamlico Sound and its tributaries south of the Albemarle Sound Management Area, hooks with natural bait must be a 4/0 or smaller unless using a circle hook with a compressed barb and fixed sinker 2 ounces or larger, not more than 6 inches away from the hook. In Coastal Fishing Waters Red Drum cannot be taken by any boat hook, gaff, spear, gig, or similar device.

Commercial Fishery

The Commercial Red Drum fishery is allowed only in Joint and Coastal fishing waters. The commercial harvest season occurs from September 1 to August 30 and is capped at 250,000 pounds (September–April: 150,000 lbs. and May–August 100,000 lbs.). Overages must be paid back, and quota cannot be rolled over to the following year. No more than seven fish per day, 18–27 inches TL, can be landed by a commercial operation. Red Drum must be landed as bycatch with either Flounder, Bluefish, Black Drum, or Striped Mullet caught on the same day, and the landed catch of target species must exceed the weight of Red Drum landed. In Coastal Fishing Waters Red Drum cannot be taken by any boat hook, gaff, spear, gig, or similar device. Additional restrictions are required for small mesh gill net operation (Small Mesh Gill Net Rules).

MONITORING AND DATA SOURCES

Since 1991, the DMF juvenile seine survey has provided an annual index of age-0 Red Drum abundance across coastal North Carolina. The fishery-independent gill net survey, initiated in 2001, monitors estuarine species, including sub-adult Red Drum, in the Pamlico Sound, and has expanded in subsequent years to the Pamlico and Neuse Rivers, Core and Bogue Sound, and Cape Fear and New Rivers. Since 2007, the adult Red Drum longline survey has provided an annual index of adult abundance in the Pamlico Sound and the mouth of the Neuse River.

Overall abundance across all life stages peaked between 2007 and 2018. There is a temporal lag where juvenile abundance spikes (such as 2011; Figure 2) followed by surges in sub-adult abundance (peaking in 2013; Figure 3) and adult abundance (2018; Figure 4). The persistent low abundance across all life stages from 2021 to 2025 suggests a recent multi-year decline in North Carolina Red Drum abundance that mirrors earlier periods of low abundance in the time series. Rather than a linear trend, the indices reveal a cyclical population dynamic where major recruitment events periodically replenish the stock.

Figure 2. The annual juvenile (age-0) abundance index with SE shaded in light blue and light green from the North Carolina Red Drum Juvenile Seine Survey, 1991–2025.

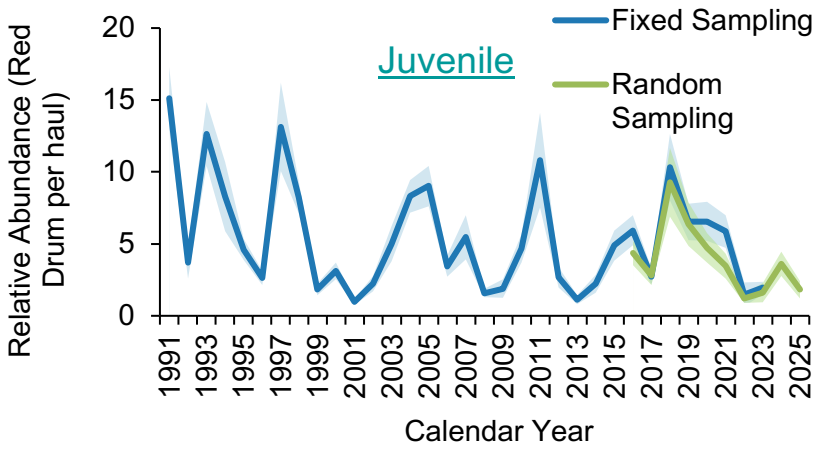


Figure 3. Annual weighted Red Drum index (number captured ages combined) with SE shaded in gray from the North Carolina Pamlico Sound Independent Gill Net Survey, 2001–2025. Survey was not conducted in 2020 due to COVID pandemic and resumed July 2021 (168 sets for the year).

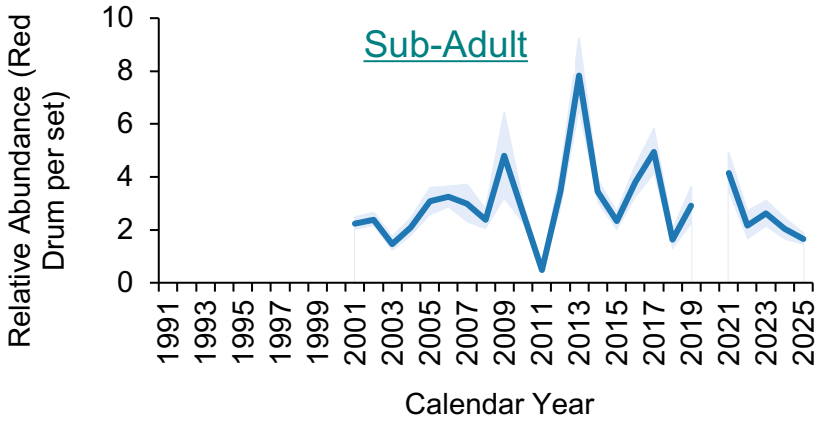
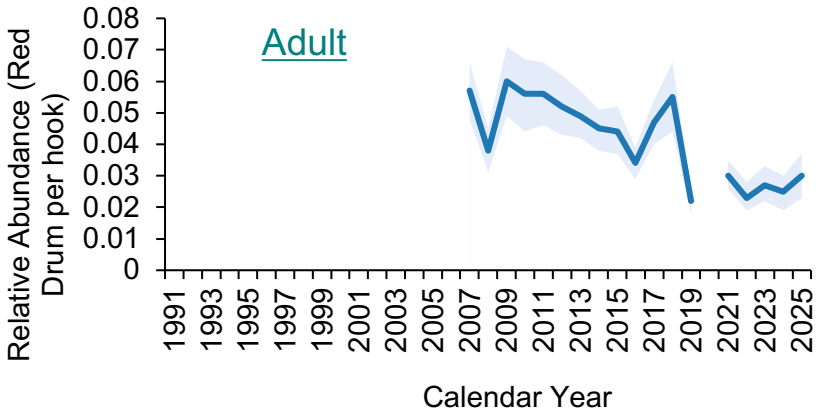


Figure 4. Annual adult Red Drum index (number captured for ages combined) with SE shaded in gray from the North Carolina Red Drum Longline Survey, 2007–2025.



COMMERCIAL FISHERY

North Carolina accounted for 78% of Northern Region's commercial landings in 2024. Virginia also allows limited commercial harvest through a five-fish per person per day bycatch fishery. Overall, region-wide commercial landings represented 8% of total Northern Region Red Drum harvest in 2024 (Figure 5).

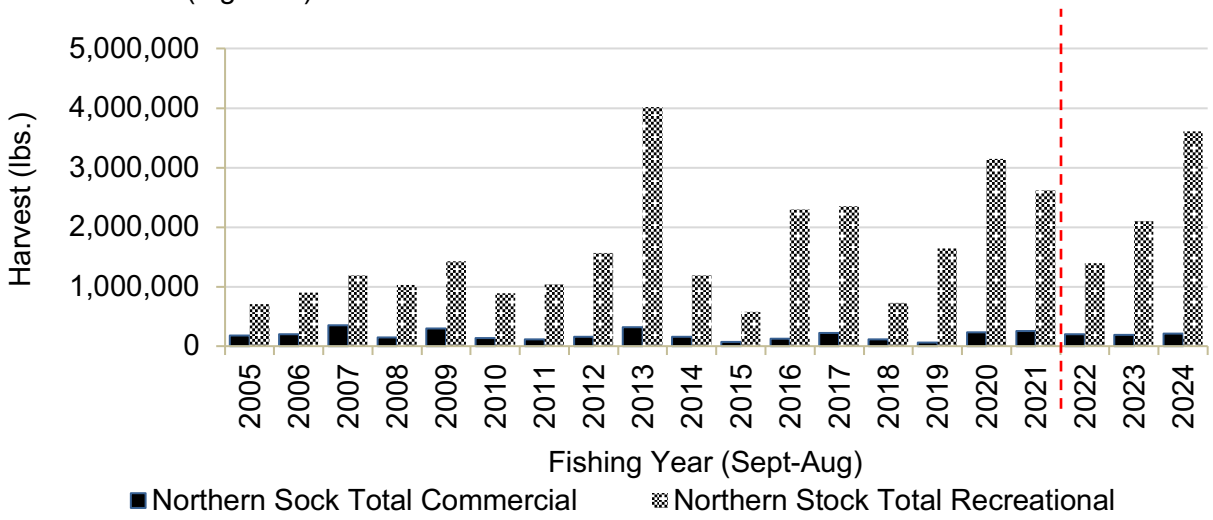


Figure 5. Northern Stock commercial and recreational harvest (lbs.), by fishing year, 2005 –2024. Red dashed line represents the terminal year of the Red Drum Benchmark Stock Assessment (2021).

North Carolina commercial Red Drum harvest is concentrated in the Pamlico Sound (~34%) followed by the Core Sound (13%), and Albemarle Sound (11%). Most landings occur September through November with a peak in October (24%). Gill nets are the predominant commercial gear, accounting for more than 90% of North Carolina Red Drum landings during the past decade. Run-around nets have accounted for an increasing proportion of landings during the past five years, while small-mesh gill nets (<5 inches) accounted for approximately 5% during 2020–2024.

Since 2020, annual commercial landings have remained near 200,000 pounds (Figure 6).

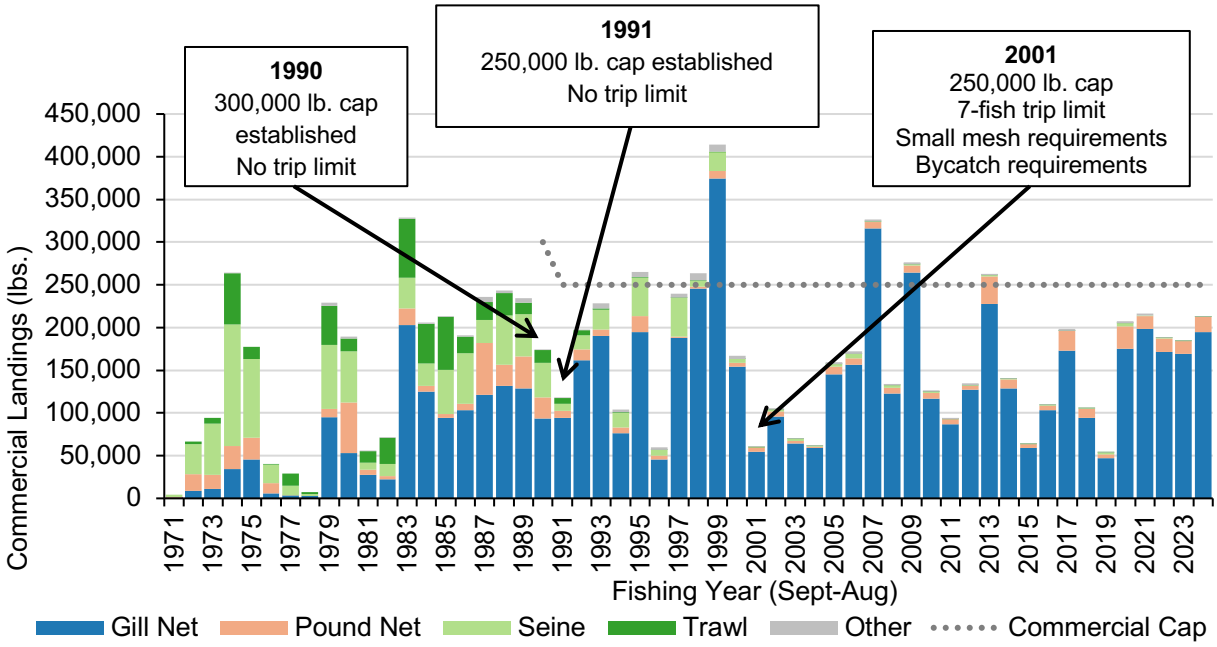


Figure 6. North Carolina commercial Red Drum landings (lbs.) by gear type and fishing year, 1972–2024. Dashed line represents the commercial landings cap (250,000 lbs.). Source N.C. Trip Ticket Program.

RECREATIONAL FISHERY

Recreational effort for Red Drum in North Carolina has steadily increased since the early 2000s with estimated trips peaking in 2017 at over 4.5 million (Figure 7). Overall, the number of Red Drum harvested recreationally from North Carolina has gradually increased since the mid-2000s with high interannual variability.

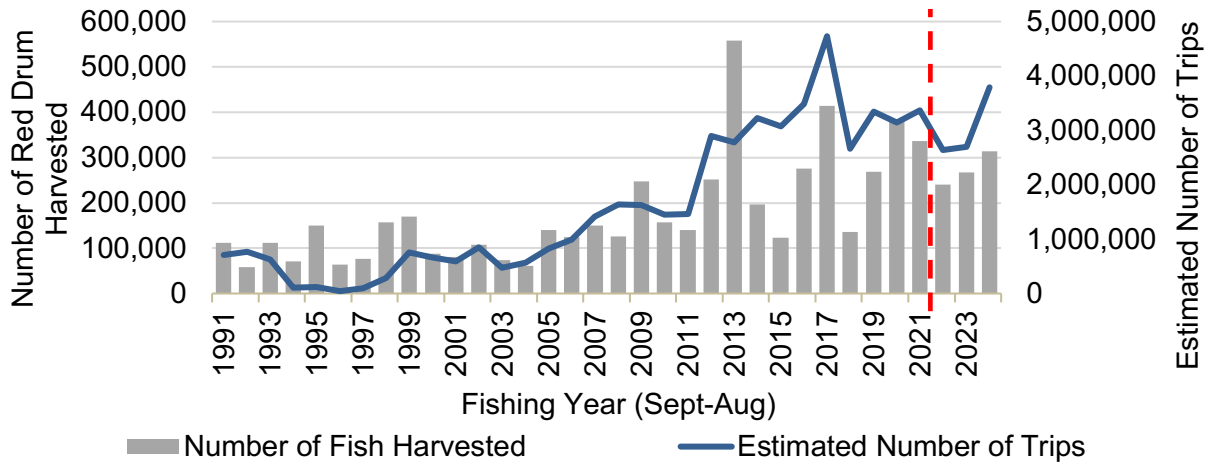


Figure 7. Estimated number of recreational trips and the number of MRIP interviews conducted where Red Drum were targeted or harvested in North Carolina by fishing year, 1991–2024. (Source: MRIP). Red dashed line represents the terminal year of the Red Drum Benchmark Stock Assessment (2021).

Recreational Red Drum fishing effort is substantially higher in North Carolina than Virginia, although effort in Virginia has increased substantially in recent years (Figure 8).

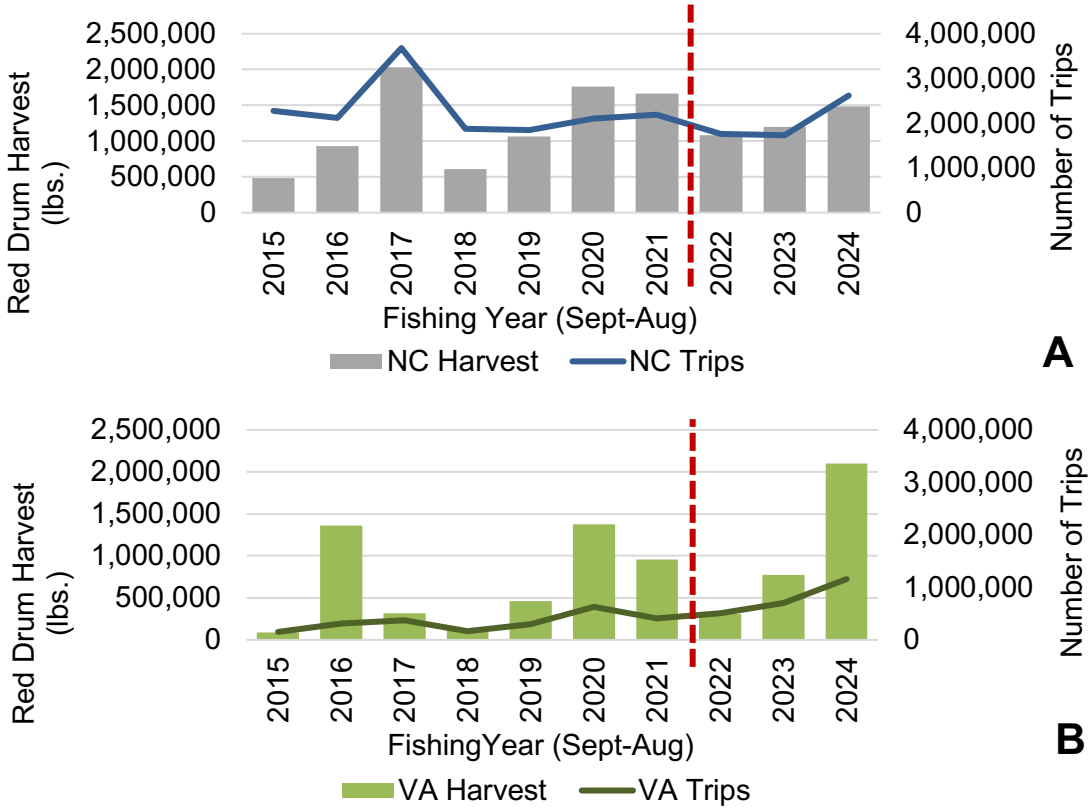


Figure 8. Pounds of Red Drum harvested (left axis; solid bars) and recreational estimates of trips (right axis; solid lines) in which Red Drum were identified as the primary target species, by state a) NC, b) VA and fishing year, 2014–2024 (Source: MRIP). Red dashed line represents the terminal year of the Red Drum Benchmark Stock Assessment (2021).

From 2005 to 2025, on average, 1,663,174 lbs. of Red Drum are harvested recreationally each year from the Northern Stock: 64% from North Carolina, 35% from Virginia, and 1% from other states in the stock range (Figure 9). Since 2021, the terminal year of the stock assessment, these percentages have shifted to 56% from North Carolina, 42% from Virginia, and 2% from other states. Stock-wide, catch-and-release accounts for most recreational encounters. Virginia surpassed North Carolina in both harvest (~470,000 fish) and releases (~2.7 million fish) in 2024 (Figure 10). Even though North Carolina has historically harvested the most fish, these post-assessment trends underscore an expanding northward catch distribution, with the Chesapeake Bay region accounting for an increasing proportion of total removals.

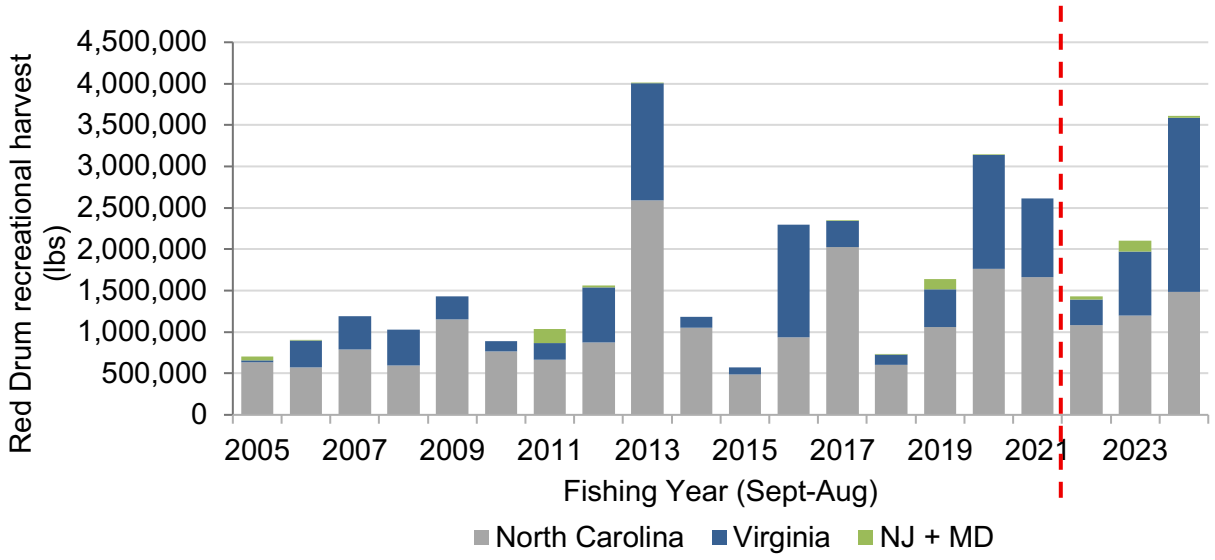


Figure 9. Red Drum recreational harvest estimate (lbs.) for the Northern Stock by state and fishing year, 2005–2024 (Source: Marine Recreational Information Program). Red dashed line represents the terminal year of the Red Drum Benchmark Stock Assessment (2021).

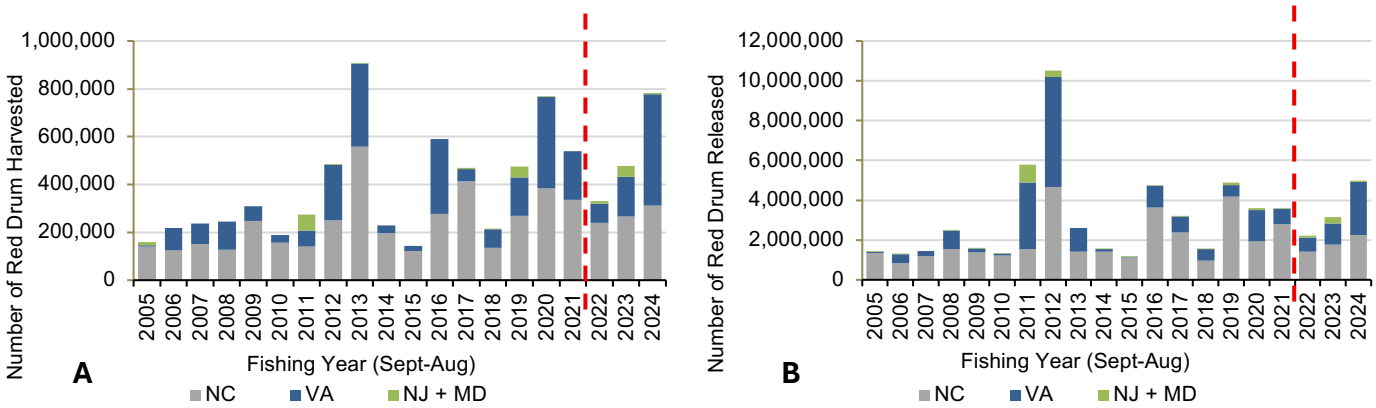


Figure 10. Number of Red Drum recreationally (a) harvested and (b) released for the Northern Stock by state and fishing year, 2005–2024 (Source: Marine Recreational Information Program). Red dashed line represents the terminal year of the Red Drum Benchmark Stock Assessment (2021).

Since adoption of the North Carolina Red Drum FMP in 2001 and implementation of the current slot and bag limits, around 1,000,000 Red Drum have been released annually in the recreational fishery (Figure 11). To calculate recreational removals, an 8% discard mortality rate (the proportion of fish released that die after capture; rate used in regional stock assessment) is applied to live releases and added to total harvest. The number of Red Drum estimated as dead discards averages 106,238 fish per fishing year and ranges from 11,180 in 1996 to 372,024 fish 2012.

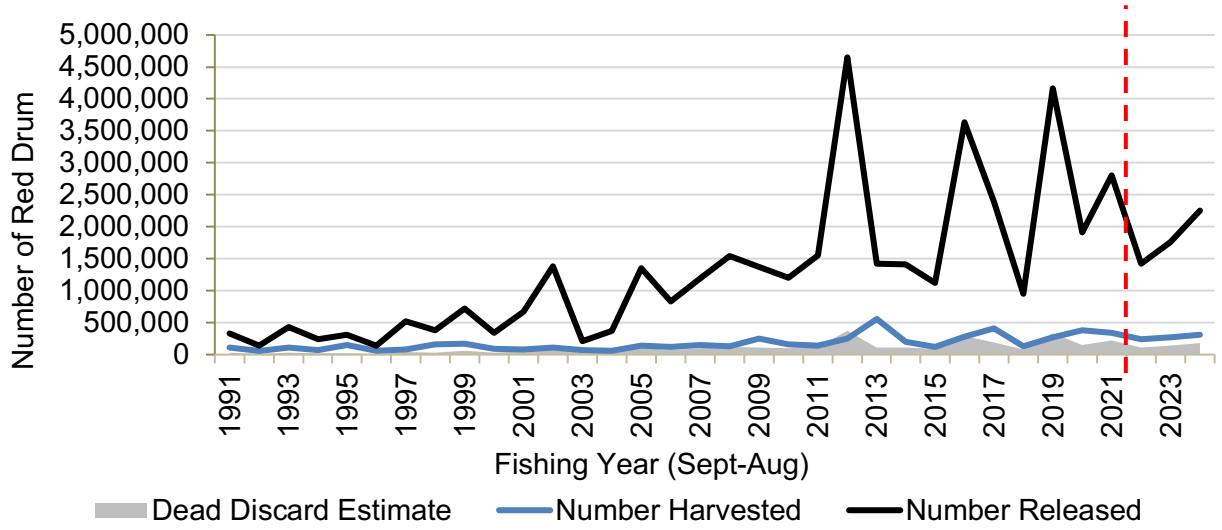


Figure 11. North Carolina recreational estimates (landings, releases, dead discards) of Red Drum in numbers of fish from the Northern Stock by fishing year, 1991 –2024. (Source: MRIP). Red dashed line represents the terminal year of the Red Drum Benchmark Stock Assessment (2021).

NORTHERN STOCK FISHERY TRENDS

From 2003–2024, North Carolina accounted for an average of 74% of total Red Drum harvest in the Northern Region, combining commercial and recreational data (Figure 1). Recreational harvest accounted for an average of 87% of total removals throughout the time series, increasing to 92% in 2024. Trends in the recreational fishery, including both harvest and discards, therefore have the greatest influence on trends in the fishery performance metric. North Carolina and New Jersey currently have the most restrictive recreational bag limit among states in the Northern Stock range. Despite the Northern Stock status being determined as not overfished and not experiencing overfishing, fishing pressure has continued to increase, and recreational removals dominate stock-wide performance metrics. The ASMFC plans to update the TLA for the Northern Stock as early as 2027. Information used to inform the TLA primarily includes North Carolina fishery-independent and catch data. North Carolina fishery-independent data have indicated declining trends, while fishing effort and harvest have increased in other areas of the Northern Stock range. Future TLA results could identify a need for additional management at the stock-wide level. The extent to which additional management measures would be required in North Carolina would depend on future ASMFC action, including how fishing mortality reductions are addressed across the Northern Stock. As part of this FMP review, North Carolina could consider whether proactive management measures to reduce fishing mortality are warranted, recognizing that additional measures in North Carolina may not address increasing fishing mortality elsewhere in the Northern Stock.

SCOPING DOCUMENT

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION IDEAS

The questions below are provided for the public to consider each aspect of the Red Drum fisheries; in general: “What aspects of the fisheries are most important to you? Would you make any changes to management to improve your experience in the fisheries?”

The suggested questions in this document are **NOT** intended to limit the scope of ideas or comments but may provide guidance to organize your thoughts.

General

- What concerns do you have for the Red Drum population?
- What do "viable” Red Drum fisheries mean to you?
- Would you support adaptive management based on new information?
- How would you like to see adaptative management used to manage this fishery given the constraints of ASMFC management?

Commercial

- What challenges do you face to operate sustainably and effectively (bycatch rules, cap, seasonal restrictions, market prices)?
- Given the MFC’s interest in exploring changes in the small mesh gill net fishery through the FMP process, are there issues with Red Drum in the small mesh gill net fishery you would like addressed?
- How do the current Red Drum bycatch regulations affect your discard rates?
- How would a shift in the commercial harvest limit from a numerical limit (7 fish) to a poundage limit affect your operations?

Recreational

- Do you fish with the primary goal of harvesting Red Drum for food or for catch and release?
- What waterbodies do you fish (generally)?
- Do you fish for Red Drum year-round or only specific months?
- Which (if any) ethical angling techniques do you practice?

MANAGEMENT MEASURES THAT WILL REMAIN IN PLACE

Management measures in place through the N.C. Red Drum FMP at the time of the adoption of ASMFC Amendment 2 to the Red Drum FMP meet ASMFC compliance requirements and will remain in place (see N.C. Fishery Management Plan for Interjurisdictional Fisheries 2022 Information Update for additional information about compliance requirements)

1. Recreational bag limits
    - Current ASMFC compliance does not allow for an increase in harvest.
2. Maximum size limit (e.g., a 28 inch TL maximum)
    - Section 4.1.2 of the ASMFC Red Drum Amendment 2: *No Red Drum larger than 27 inches total length (TL) shall be harvested. All states must implement a 27 inches TL or smaller maximum size limit for Red Drum*

3. Commercial trip limits
    - Section 4.2.2 of the ASMFC Red Drum Amendment 2: *States without a commercial landings cap for Red Drum shall maintain their current commercial trip or possession limits. States may implement more restrictive limits. States which currently have a commercial fishery landings cap for Red Drum may reduce their trip limits in order to remain below their cap within any given fishing year.*