



March 20, 2025

Senator Matt Brass
Chairman, Senate Rules Committee
453 State Capitol
Atlanta, GA 30334

Re: House Bill 443; Fees for Reef and Migratory Fish Endorsements

Position: Support

Dear Chairman Brass and Honorable Members of the Senate Rules Committee,

On behalf of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, we are writing to express our strong support for Georgia HB 443, a bill that would provide for relatively minor fees for reef and migratory fish endorsements while greatly advancing Georgia's leadership in recreational saltwater fisheries management in the South Atlantic region.

The key to successfully managing any popular species of fish, and access to those fish by recreational anglers, is having reliable information on which to base management decisions. The federal system of fisheries management has very little real time information on the actual population abundance and, instead, relies heavily on the number of fish caught in the past to project how many fish can be removed from a population in the future. While catch in the much smaller commercial sector can be counted in near real time, recreational landings and discards are estimated through the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). MRIP is a broad, general survey taken over two-month windows that roughly estimates harvest as well as dead discards.¹ While MRIP may be an effective tool for providing general trend data over a long time period, it is not capable of providing timely estimates of angler catch and effort within a relatively short season, nor was it ever designed to.

¹ "Marine Recreational Information Program, Survey Design and Statistical Methods for Estimation of Recreational Fisheries Catch and Effort" *NOAA Fisheries*, updated April 2024, <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/s3/2024-05/MRIP-Survey-Design-and-Statistical-Methods-Updated-April-2024-508.pdf>

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Further, MRIP struggles to accurately estimate recreational dead discards, the main driver of the short South Atlantic red snapper season and forthcoming restrictions on black sea bass, among other species. Without knowing how many people are actually fishing for red snapper or any federally managed species, it is difficult to estimate how many total fish are caught and released. As an example of the challenges presented by MRIP, in 2023 the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) confirmed the flaws within MRIP when they revealed that the Fishing Effort Survey has been producing estimates of harvest and dead discard that are likely inflated by 30-40%.² Yet, they still used this flawed data system to give Georgia’s anglers only one day of red snapper fishing last year.

In 2017, the South Atlantic Council began considering the implementation of federal permits for private anglers in the red snapper fishery in an effort to improve the sampling frame and catch estimates.³ This amendment is still under consideration. Anglers have become increasingly frustrated with federal management of red snapper and other species in the South Atlantic, so it seems unreasonable to ask them to buy a federal permit that few have confidence will get them out of the mess the federal fisheries management system has created in the first place. However, as we have seen in other regions like the Gulf, anglers are much more willing to pay a new permit fee if it is implemented by the state and is used to collect data that improves their access to fisheries.

It is no coincidence that, while the recreational anglers in the South Atlantic were granted only a single day of fishing for red snapper in 2024, their Gulf of Mexico counterparts enjoyed months of fishing for red snapper.⁴ Before 2018, anglers in the Gulf experienced similar issues as the South Atlantic under federal management. The red snapper population was growing while the seasons were becoming more restrictive, being set at just 3 days in federal waters in 2017.⁵ By this time, many of the Gulf states had already developed their own recreational data collection programs, which paved the way for a 2018-2019 pilot program that allowed state management of their own recreational red snapper quota. The pilot program was exceedingly successful, and in 2020, the Gulf Council permanently implemented this state-based management model for Gulf recreational anglers moving forward.⁶

² “Fishing Effort Survey Research and Improvements” *NOAA Fisheries*, 2023,

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/recreational-fishing-data/fishing-effort-survey-research-and-improvements>

³ “Snapper Grouper Amendment 46” *South Atlantic Fishery Management Council*, June 2024,

<https://safmc.net/amendments/snapper-grouper-amendment-46/>

⁴ “Snapper, Red” *Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council*, <https://gulfcouncil.org/species/snapper-red/>

⁵ “NOAA Announces the 2017 Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Recreational Seasons” *NOAA Fisheries*, May 2, 2017,

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/bulletin/noaa-announces-2017-gulf-mexico-red-snapper-recreational-seasons>

⁶ “State Management Program for Recreational Red Snapper” *Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council*, May 2019, accessed July 2, 2024, <https://gulfcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/State-Management-Program-for-Red-Snapper-Final-5-23-2019.pdf>

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The turning point in the Gulf was that all five Gulf states developed their own recreational catch data programs to either supplement or replace MRIP. The more timely and accurate state data collection programs allow them to fish until their individual quota is met, and they are no longer bound by the often short, overly precautionary seasons set by NMFS using unreliable MRIP data.

HB 443 will provide the same opportunity for the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to take a leadership role on behalf of its recreational anglers who are denied appropriate access to their marine fisheries by MRIP's inadequacies. Therefore, we strongly support HB 443 and urge a one-time appropriation to allow the Georgia DNR to immediately begin building a recreational data collection program that is more timely, accurate and accountable to Georgia's anglers than the federal system of fisheries management.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Conner Barker".

Conner Barker
Senior Coordinator, Southeastern States
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation
cbarker@congressionalsportsmen.org

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