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THE OPENING OF GEORGIA'S BEACHES TELLS THE STORY

The opening of Georgia's beaches in 2026 did not occur in isolation.

It followed one of the most important fisheries discussions Georgia recreational fishermen have witnessed in years: the Red Drum Town Hall.

During that process, the public was introduced to concepts such as spawning stock biomass, recruitment, overfishing, and rebuilding. Recreational fishermen were told that healthy fisheries depend upon healthy fish populations and long-term sustainability.

At the same time, many fishermen came away with a different realization.

While red drum were being discussed through the lens of rebuilding, the broader ecosystem and the fish species most commonly associated with shrimp-trawl bycatch remained largely outside that discussion.

Then the beaches were opened.

For many fishermen, that opening answered a question that had been building throughout the Red Drum Town Hall process.

What happens when rebuilding goals and commercial harvest interests collide?

This newsletter is an examination of that answer.

On June 9, 2026, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources opened Georgia's beaches and state waters to another season of commercial shrimp trawling.

For many people, the announcement appeared routine.

For others, it revealed something far more significant.

The opening of the beaches was not simply the opening of a shrimp season.

It was a management decision.

And management decisions reveal priorities.

During the Red Drum Town Hall process, Georgia fishermen were introduced to a series of fisheries-management concepts.

Spawning Potential Ratio (SPR).

Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB).

Recruitment.

Fishing mortality.

Overfished.

Experiencing overfishing.

The public was told these concepts mattered because healthy fisheries require healthy adult fish populations capable of sustaining future generations.

That principle should not begin and end with red drum.

A sustainable recreational fishery depends upon diversification.

Atlantic croaker, spot croaker, weakfish, southern kingfish (whiting), flounder, spotted seatrout, black drum, sheepshead, and red drum should collectively form a diverse recreational fishery.

Diversification is one of the foundations of long-term sustainability.

When those surrounding species are not rebuilt, fishing pressure does not disappear.

It simply shifts.

The pressure becomes concentrated on the remaining species that continue to support a recreational fishery.

That reality makes the discussion surrounding red drum impossible to separate from the discussion surrounding bycatch.

If spawning stock matters, then it should matter for Atlantic croaker.

If recruitment matters, then it should matter for spot croaker.

If adult abundance matters, then it should matter for weakfish.

If rebuilding matters, then it should matter for southern kingfish (whiting), flounder, and every other species that forms part of Georgia's public-trust fishery.

Yet the management record reflects a very different response.

De minimis status.

Deregulation.

Reduced protections.

Complete deregulation.

These are not rebuilding plans.

These are not restoration plans.

These are not pathways toward increasing adult abundance.

They are not pathways toward diversification.

During the Red Drum Town Hall process, the public was told that red drum were overfished and experiencing overfishing.

At the same time, recreational fishermen were told that the ecosystem itself would not be incorporated into the rebuilding discussion.

For many fishermen, that was a revealing moment.

Because if the surrounding fish stocks are not being rebuilt, and if the ecosystem is not being considered, then the long-term sustainability of the recreational fishery itself is placed into question.

At the center of this debate is a simple reality.

A shrimp trawl cannot distinguish between a shrimp and a juvenile fish of similar size.

That mechanical limitation is the very reason bycatch reduction devices were developed in the first place.

The question today is not whether those devices exist.

The question is whether the management record that followed their implementation reflects the rebuilding of the fish stocks most commonly associated with shrimp-trawl bycatch.

The public can examine that record for itself.

The creel surveys exist.

The de minimis classifications exist.

The deregulations exist.

The complete deregulations exist.

Those actions are part of the historical record.

The opening of Georgia's beaches in 2026 did not occur in the absence of that record.

It occurred in full view of it.

The creel surveys already reveal the absence of abundant adult fish in many of these species.

The regulations already reflect de minimis classifications, deregulations, and reduced protections.

The recreational fishing public does not need another study to recognize this reality.

The fishermen already know.

When was the last time you caught an Atlantic croaker weighing five pounds?

When was the last time you caught a southern kingfish weighing more than two pounds?

When was the last time you caught a weakfish weighing more than six pounds?

When was the last time you caught a spot croaker weighing more than one pound?

The answers are found on the water.

The answers are found in the creel surveys.

The answers are found in the regulations.

The answers are found in the absence of rebuilding plans.

That is why the opening of Georgia's beaches is so significant.

The decision was made with full knowledge of the condition of these stocks.

The decision was made with full knowledge that shrimp trawls interact with these species.

The decision was made with full knowledge that de minimis classifications, deregulations, and reduced protections already exist for many of them.

Yet the beaches were opened anyway.

For many recreational fishermen, that decision triggered a realization that extended far beyond shrimping itself.

The questions being raised in Georgia's state waters began to resemble questions that had recently emerged in federal waters.

The issue was no longer simply about shrimp.

It was about priority.

Who benefits from the management framework, and who is ultimately asked to bear the consequences of it?

Many recreational fishermen had recently witnessed a similar situation unfold in federal waters.

After expanded recreational access to South Atlantic red snapper was announced, recreational fishermen anticipated the opportunity to participate in a fishery that had effectively been unavailable to most anglers for more than fifteen years.

Before that opportunity could occur, commercial interests challenged the action in federal court.

The court reviewed the management framework, the governing statutes, and the existing allocations.

The result was that the recreational season was stopped before it could begin.

The recreational public was told to stand down.

For many fishermen, that moment revealed something that could not be unseen.

The management framework itself reflected commercial priority.

Once the public saw it, they could not unsee it.

The opening of Georgia's beaches creates a similar realization in state waters.

No federal judge was necessary.

The decision was made openly.

The beaches were opened.

The shrimp season moved forward.

The concerns surrounding bycatch moved nowhere.

The questions surrounding rebuilding moved nowhere.

The same management record remained in place.

For many recreational fishermen, the most surprising realization is that the evidence was never hidden.

It was printed on the regulations.

It was printed on the creel cards.

It was reflected in de minimis classifications.

It was reflected in deregulations.

It was reflected in management decisions that accumulated year after year.

The public simply was never shown how those pieces fit together.

Today, recreational fishermen are beginning to understand what those actions mean.

And once understood, it becomes difficult to ignore what they reveal.

The public was not present when many of these decisions were made.

The public is present now.

Today's legislators inherited this framework.

Today's citizens inherited the consequences.

That is why this moment is historically significant.

Not because the regulations suddenly changed.

Not because shrimping suddenly began.

Not because de minimis classifications suddenly appeared.

But because the public is beginning to understand the relationship between all of them.

The question is no longer whether the evidence exists.

The question is what will be done about it.

The manner in which the opening was presented to the public is equally revealing.

The announcement creates the impression that Georgia shrimp are only now becoming available to consumers because state waters have been opened.

In reality, commercial shrimp harvest has continued beyond the state-water boundary, and seafood markets have not been waiting for June 9 to receive shrimp.

What was opened were Georgia's shallow state waters and the nursery habitats immediately adjacent to our beaches.

That distinction matters.

The issue is not whether shrimp are available.

What makes the announcement so revealing is not merely that the season opened.

It is that the opening was presented as an unqualified success.

The public was shown the benefits of shrimp harvest.

The public was shown the benefits to commerce.

The public was shown the benefits to consumers.

What the public was not shown were the questions surrounding bycatch, rebuilding, diversification, adult fish abundance, or the long-term condition of the recreational fishery.

Those concerns simply did not appear in the discussion.

That omission speaks as loudly as the opening itself.

Perhaps the most significant observation is not what the announcement said.

It is what the opening decision itself suggests.

The concerns surrounding bycatch, diversification, adult fish abundance, de minimis classifications, deregulation, ecosystem function, and long-term recreational sustainability had already been raised.

Those concerns were known.

Those concerns were documented.

Those concerns had been presented.

Yet the season opened exactly the same.

For many recreational fishermen, that outcome creates an unavoidable question.

If those concerns were genuinely incorporated into the decision-making process, why did they appear to have no effect on the decision itself?

The issue is not whether the concerns were heard.

The issue is whether they mattered.

The issue is whether the long-term sustainability of Georgia's recreational fishery is being given equal consideration.

The consequences extend far beyond the species listed on a creel card.

The fish discussed throughout this newsletter are not merely recreational targets.

They are part of the biological foundation that supports Georgia's coastal ecosystem.

When those foundational fish populations decline, the effects do not stop with croaker, spot croaker, weakfish, whiting, or flounder.

The effects move throughout the system.

They influence the abundance and seasonal presence of species that drive some of Georgia's most important recreational opportunities, including tarpon, cobia, king mackerel, tripletail, and other migratory fish that attract anglers and support coastal tourism.

Diversification is not simply a recreational fishing objective.

It is a measure of ecosystem health.

A coast supported by abundant and diverse fish populations creates opportunities.

A coast supported by declining fish populations creates limitations.

That is why this discussion is ultimately about the future.

The federal red snapper dispute showed recreational fishermen what happens when a management framework is allowed to develop without sufficient consideration of public access and long-term public benefit.

The opening of Georgia's beaches reveals a similar concern in state waters.

The question is no longer whether the existing framework can continue.

The question is whether it prepares Georgia for the future.

Because every season that passes without rebuilding these foundational fish stocks is another season in which the recreational fishery becomes less diversified, less resilient, and less capable of supporting future generations.

Preparation for the future begins with abundance.

Preparation for the future begins with rebuilding.

Preparation for the future begins with restoring the biological foundation upon which the entire fishery depends.

Georgia's public trust deserves an answer.

Georgia's recreational fishermen deserve an answer.

And the children who will inherit this fishery deserve an answer.

Let the wild remain wild.