

FY25 - Enhancing Recruitment & Retention for the *SAFMC Release* Citizen Science Project

Progress Report: October 2025 – March 2026

Submitted By:

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Report Title: FY25: Enhancing Recruitment & Retention for the *SAFMC Release* Citizen Science Project

Recipient Organization: South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

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Project Consultants: South Carolina Department of Natural Resources & Georgia Department of Natural Resources

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Grant Summary:

The *SAFMC Release* project was developed through the *SAFMC's* Citizen Science Program. It works with fishermen from all sectors to collect information on released shallow water grouper and Red Snapper using the *SciFish* mobile application. It provides a streamlined approach for fishermen to provide a photograph of released fish along with details such as length, release location and depth caught, condition, and use of barotrauma mitigation techniques. The project focuses on collecting data on the size of released fish and information that helps characterize how many released fish survive.

The primary objectives of this project are to:

- Continue data collection through the *SAFMC Release* citizen science project on released shallow-water grouper (Black, Gag, Red, Scamp, Yellowfin and Yellowmouth Groupers; Red Hind; Rock Hind; Coney and Graysby) and Red Snapper in the South Atlantic
- Use license data from the National Saltwater Angler Registry (NSAR) to recruit private recreational fishermen for the *SAFMC Release* citizen science project
- Continue opportunistic strategies to recruit fishermen for the *SAFMC Release* citizen science project
- Enhance *SAFMC Release's* participant retention and reactivation within the project

To accomplish the objectives, work has been divided into four primary tasks outlined below.

- **Task A:** *SAFMC Release* Participant Recruitment via National Saltwater Angler Registry
- **Task B:** Continue and expand current *SAFMC Release* recruitment strategies
- **Task C:** *SAFMC Release* Participant Retention Strategies
- **Task D:** Data collection, QA/QC, and analysis

Summary of Progress:

Between the time this proposal was submitted through the SERO NOFO (Spring 2025) and when funding was received (October 2025), there were transitions in NOAA Fisheries personnel involved in this project. Drew Cathey, a co-PI, transitioned from a position with NOAA Fisheries to a position with the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (NCDMF). He remains able to serve as a co-PI and work on this project in that role. Lauren Dolinger-Few, a co-PI, retired from NOAA Fisheries and the contact identified as her replacement for this work was not able/available to work on this project. The project has moved forward with Byrd (SAFMC) and Cathey (NCDMF) as co-PIs working closely with state agency collaborators.

A Citizen Science Project Assistant part time contractor, Kate Chatman, started on March 31, 2026. The recruitment announcement for this position was open January 8–29, 2026. Structured interviews were conducted with the top candidates February 18-20, 2026.

A planning team consisting of Council, NCDMF, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR), and Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GADNR) staff met seven times during the reporting period to plan for the recruitment mailing (Task A) and discuss other SAFMC Release outreach efforts and opportunities to collaborate (Tasks B & C).

Progress updates are summarized by task below.

Task A: *SAFMC Release* Participant Recruitment via National Saltwater Angler Registry

This task originally focused on recruiting new SAFMC Release participants in Georgia and South Carolina using the National Saltwater Angler Registry (NSAR) via random stratified mailings. The initial approach involved sending a recruitment letter with a unique identifier, a QR code linking to a mailing-specific SAFMC Release sign-up page, and a SAFMC Release sticker. Recipients could scan the QR code or visit the weblink and complete an online form to sign up for SAFMC Release. Council staff would then onboard participants by creating accounts in SciFish and following up via email with app and login details and project training resources.

Through other funding sources, the SAFMC Release project was able to do a pilot NSAR mini recruitment mailing in summer 2025. Insights from this effort informed the design and strategy for the expanded 2026 recruitment mailing under this project.

Because NOAA Fisheries personnel are no longer directly involved, the 2026 mailing will rely on saltwater fishing license and/or permitting data obtained directly from SCDNR and GADNR, rather than the NSAR. Confidentiality agreements were established as needed to facilitate this data sharing.

Based on lessons learned from the 2025 pilot, the project team decided to use a large post card (6"x 9") for the 2026 mailing instead of a traditional envelope and letter. This format is intended to improve engagement by allowing recipients to immediately view key information and access the QR code

without opening an envelope. It also reduces costs, enabling distribution to a larger audience of licensed / permitted anglers in both states.

Gallup was selected as the mailing vendor with a contract finalized in March 2026. The target deadline for the mailing is the week of April 20th. This timing will allow the postcard to be distributed prior to the opening of the South Atlantic shallow water grouper season (May 1) and prior to potential outreach related to the Red Snapper Exempted Fishing Permits (if approved) in SC and GA. The shift to a postcard format allows for a total distribution of 40,000 pieces (20,000 per state), compared to the 28,000 originally proposed.

The planning team drafted a post card for the mailing and the corresponding online sign-up form specific to the 2026 mailing. Gallup provided additional feedback on the post card which is being incorporated into the final design.

In collaboration with state agency partners, the stratification approach used in the 2025 pilot was refined for 2026. The updated scheme includes state and county of residence (categorized as coastal high, coastal low, and selected non-coastal counties). Eligibility criteria require individuals to hold an annual or lifetime license or permit and be between the ages of 16 and 85. To maximize reach, mailings are limited to one postcard per household. The stratification methodology was informed by effort and catch data from MRIP APAIS, state license and permit records, findings from the 2025 pilot, and input from state agency experts. The updated code was tested using sample state datasets, and final license data was provided to Gallup by co-PI Cathey on April 7 to generate the sample draw.

Task B: Continue and expand current *SAFMC Release* recruitment strategies

During the reporting period, the following recruitment activities have been conducted for the SAFMC Release project.

- An outreach team, consisting of SAFMC staff partnering with the South Atlantic Sea Grant Reef Fish Fellow, collaborated on the following outreach efforts
 - The team visited 10 tackle shops and marinas (3 in SC; 4 in GA; 3 in FL) to build and strengthen relationships with these businesses. During these visits, they shared information and distributed informational materials on SAFMC Release and the Best Fishing Practices campaign.
 - Staff helped coordinate and manned a booth focused on the Council, Best Fishing Practices, and the SAFMC Release project at the Haddrell's Fishing Expo in January 2026 in Charleston, SC. At the event, staff also collaborated with charter captain Mark Phelps to deliver a seminar on bottom fishing seminar, best fishing practices and SAFMC Release.
 - Staff participated in GADNR's CoastFest in March 2026, helping coordinate a booth focused on the Council, Best Fishing Practices, and the SAFMC Release project.

- Citizen Science staff participated in SCDNR's Charter Guide Summit Series in March 2026, giving a short presentation on the SAFMC Release project in Georgetown, Charleston, and Bluffton, SC.
- Staff participated in the Council's Lines of Communication meeting series in Georgia (Savannah, Darien, and Brunswick in November 2025) and North Carolina (Bolivia, Morehead City, Hatteras, and Manteo in March 2026). Citizen Science staff helped facilitate activities and designed and manned a booth focused on the Citizen Science Program and projects, including SAFMC Release.
- Information on SAFMC Release is regularly shared via the Council's newsletter, the South Atlantic Bite, and via #CitSciFri social media posts on Facebook, Instagram, X, and LinkedIn
- Staff provided presentations on the Citizen Science Program's activities including updates on the SAFMC Release project at Council Advisory Panel (AP) meetings including the fall 2025 Snapper Grouper AP and the spring 2026 Law Enforcement and Habitat AP meetings.

Task C: SAFMC Release Participant Retention Strategies

During the reporting period, the following retention activities have been conducted for the SAFMC Release project.

- Staff have regular one on one communication with SAFMC Release participants including helping troubleshoot app and data collection issues, answering questions, and thanking them for submissions.
- Staff distributed a monthly e-newsletter to participants during the reporting period. Newsletters cover various topics including participant and submission highlights, summary information from logged data, and information on Best Fishing Practices to help increase survivorship of released fish.
- The SAFMC Release 2025 Annual Data Summary was prepared and shared with project participants in early March 2026 and will be posted to the SAFMC Release webpage in April 2026.
- The SAFMC Release Participant Recognition Program (PRP) 2025 milestone winners were identified and recognized within the Annual Data Summary and the SAFMC Release newsletter.
- The SAFMC Release [Participant Recognition Program 2026 milestones](#) were finalized and corresponding milestone recognition items were designed and ordered. 2026 milestones are monitored weekly and recognition items are sent to participants as specified in the 2026 milestone document.
- Staff are collaborating with Sea Grant on the 2026 Sea Grant South Atlantic Release Rodeo. This is a 3-month challenge from May 1 – July 31 where South Atlantic fishermen can earn chances to win Sea Grant giveaways by sharing data on released shallow water grouper and Red Snapper through [SAFMC Release](#). During the reporting period, staff have worked with Sea Grant on the challenge structure, talking points, a promotional flyer, and development on an outreach and communication plan. Staff will begin sharing information on the South Atlantic Release Rodeo in April 2026.

Task D: Data collection, QA/QC, and analysis

- Data collection continued during the reporting period with QA/QC performed weekly by staff. Photos are used to validate species identifications and lengths, as appropriate. Staff follow up with participants to verify any unusual submissions.
- Data will be provided for assessment and management as appropriate.

Project Challenges & Opportunities

- There were staffing changes within NOAA Fisheries between proposal submission and the receipt of funding. Co-PI Drew Cathey transitioned from NOAA to NCDMF and will continue to contribute to the project in his new role. Co-PI Lauren Dolinger Few retired from NOAA, and a replacement was not identified for this effort. For the 2026 random stratified mailing, South Carolina and Georgia saltwater fishing license and/or permitting data will be obtained directly from SCDNR and GADNR rather than through the NSAR. Confidentiality agreements were set up as needed by the project team to make this feasible.
- The SAFMC has been able to work with several agencies and organizations to conduct outreach for the SAFMC Release project. We are extremely grateful to NCDMF, SCDNR, GADNR, and Sea Grant for helping share information about the project with their stakeholders and collaborating on outreach activities, as appropriate. Partnering with these groups helps SAFMC Citizen Science staff reach a much broader audience than would have been possible otherwise.
- Through other funding sources, the SAFMC Release project conducted a pilot NSAR mini recruitment mailing in summer 2025 in collaboration with SCDNR, GADNR, and NOAA Fisheries/NCDMF. Insights from this effort have informed the 2026 recruitment mailing and are expected to improve SAFMC Release sign-ups.
- The part-time Citizen Science Project Assistant contractor did not begin work until March 31, 2026, which was later than anticipated. Staff are working to onboard her quickly so she can support new participant onboarding, data QA/QC, the PRP, and other recruitment and retention activities.
- South Atlantic state agencies have applied to NOAA Fisheries for Exempted Fishing Permits (EFP) to pilot test state data collection and management strategies for the recreational harvest of red snapper in 2026. Council staff are working closely with state agencies to coordinate messaging and outreach for SAFMC Release and the EFPs (if approved), as appropriate, to increase awareness and participation of both while minimizing angler confusion.

Expenditures

The table below summarizes the FY25 project expenditures through April 9, 2026.

Expense Category	FY25 Grant Total	Expenditures through 4/9/2026	Remaining funds as of 4/9/2026
Personnel	\$34,424	\$6,232	\$28,192
Fringe	\$14,294	\$4,831	\$9,463
Contract	\$54,363	\$23,702	\$30,661

Travel	\$4,430	\$1,140	\$3,290
Other / Supplies	\$22,300	\$1,071	\$20,599
Indirect	\$7,545	\$0	\$7,545
TOTAL	\$137,356	\$37,605	\$99,751