

Anglers to get longer snapper season

By Keith Magill

Executive Editor

Louisiana anglers will get to fish more waters for more days than normally allowed for red snapper for the next two years under a newly approved test program.

Federal officials approved Louisiana's request to oversee the snapper seasons, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries said Monday.

The Exempted Fishing Permit, or EFP, will allow the agency to oversee snapper fishing in both state and federal waters up to 200 miles offshore.

The Wildlife and Fisheries Commission is scheduled to decide the season dates during a meeting scheduled for May 3 in Baton Rouge.

"Once the commission makes its determination, Louisiana anglers will be able to enjoy red snapper fishing under consistent regulations for both state and federal waters," said Wildlife and Fisheries Secretary Jack Montoucet. "State management of the red snapper season has been pushed for the past several years by the department and has received strong support from Gov. John Bel Edwards, along with other state and congressional officials."

In its draft proposal, the agency proposes opening the state and federal red snapper seasons May 25, the Friday before Memorial Day. It would remain open seven days a week until state figures show the federally approved quotas of 743,000 pounds for anglers and 317,000 for charter fishermen have been met.

NOAA Fisheries, which approved the state's request last week, chose to retain control of the charter fishing seasons. The federal agency is expected to set dates for snapper fishing throughout the Gulf of Mexico soon, officials said.

The approval drew praise from Houma-Thibodaux's two congressmen, who have advocated for such a measure.

"This is great news for the countless number of normal, everyday people across Louisiana and the Gulf Coast who have seen their fishing opportunities decline year after year through abbreviated federal red

snapper seasons,' Rep. Garret Graves, R-Baton Rouge., said in a news release. 'Last year, we successfully avoided the threat of a three-day season but found ourselves back on a trajectory to have less than a week this year.

'But by working with fisheries managers back home, NOAA and others, we were able to get to a consensus solution with the five Gulf states that ensures recreational fishers will have a fair opportunity to go out and enjoy the bounty of the Gulf this season."

'After the threat of only a three-day season last year, I am pleased to see an expanded red snapper fishing season for private anglers this time around, strengthening Louisiana's rightful position as the 'Sportsman's Paradise,' " said U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise, R-Metairie.

He said he hopes the action will lead to turning over more authority to states to set red snapper seasons off their coast in the long-term.

Recreational fishermen have for years complained that federal authorities have set overly restrictive catch limits and unnecessarily short seasons for red snapper despite a rebound in the species' numbers. Environmental and conservation groups counter that the shortened seasons are necessary to help the species meet federal targets for rebounding after years of severe overfishing.

Anglers will be able to fish in both state and federal waters but are required to hold a valid Louisiana Recreational Offshore Landing Permit in addition to regular basic and saltwater fishing licenses.

Recreational fishermen will also have the option of participating in a pilot program that uses a cellphone app to help state officials track snapper catch numbers.

State fisheries officials said they plan to issue more details about the red snapper seasons after the commission sets the dates. You can read the draft application and answers to frequently asked questions online at wlf.louisiana.gov/snapper-efp-faqs. The link accompanies this story at houmatoday.com and dailycomet.com.