



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE

Southeast Regional Office

263 13th Avenue South

St. Petersburg, Florida 33701-5505

<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov>

F/SER28:SS

Katherine Overly, Fisheries Biologist
Riverside Technology Inc. Contractor
NOAA NMFS Panama City Lab
3500 Delwood Beach Dr.
Panama City Beach, FL, 32408

NOV 13 2018

Andrew W. David
Research Fishery Biologist
NOAA Fisheries, Southeast Fisheries Science Center
3500 Delwood Beach Rd.
Panama City, Florida 32408

Dear Ms. Overly and Mr. David:

This exempted fishing permit (EFP) authorizes you to work with NMFS staff and contracted commercial fishermen aboard contracted commercial fishing vessels to collect reef fish species in waters of the U.S. Caribbean exclusive economic zone (EEZ) off Puerto Rico. Because NMFS staff may not always be aboard the vessel, and the commercial fisherman may conduct the activities without direct NMFS control, you sought and we are issuing an EFP.

This authorization is issued under procedures established at 50 CFR § 600.745(b) and exempts the described activities from regulations implementing the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Fishery of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Specifically, this EFP exempts you, NMFS staff, and commercial fishermen aboard the commercial fishing vessels included on the enclosed list from regulations found at 50 CFR § 622.435 (Seasonal and Area Closures) as listed below. All other regulations remain in effect. The harvest of reef fish under this EFP is authorized in specified federal waters, from the date of this EFP to August 1, 2020. These exemptions apply to U.S. Caribbean waters under federal jurisdiction. Collection efforts planned to be conducted in state or territorial waters should be authorized through the appropriate government authorities, as required.

This EFP exempts project participants listed in this EFP from regulations found at 50 CFR § 622.435 (Seasonal and Area Closures) as listed below:

- Fishing each year during the February 1 – April 30 seasonal closure for red, black, tiger, yellowfin, or yellowedge groupers (50 CFR § 622.435(a)(1)(i));
- Fishing each year during the December 1 – last day of February seasonal closure for red hind grouper (50 CFR § 622.435(a)(1)(ii));
- Fishing each year during the October 1 – December 31 seasonal closure for vermilion, black, silk, or blackfin snappers (50 CFR § 622.435(a)(1)(iii));
- A maximum of 10 fishing trips over the two year period (approximately five trips per year) during the October 1 – March 31 seasonal closure of Bajo de Sico (50 CFR § 622.435(a)(2)(iv)).



The objectives of this project are to use video imagery to define essential fish habitat (EFH) of deep-water snapper species off the coast of Puerto Rico and to collect biological samples in order to determine the annual reproductive cycle, growth estimations, and age and size at sexual maturation of the queen snapper (*Etelis oculatus*) and blackfin snapper (*Lutjanus vivanus*).

Activities in federal waters consist of harvesting reef fish during a total of 450 fishing trips in the two year project period, 225 of which will be within the U.S. Caribbean EEZ off Puerto Rico. The remaining trips will be conducted in territorial waters. Sampling sites will be randomly selected from locations with a high probability of containing possible EFH for deep-water snappers, as determined by bathymetric maps recently produced by NOAA's Marine Spatial Ecology Division. The target depth range for this project is 100 - 500 meters (m), with sampling sites selected in each 50 m depth bin throughout that range.

Sampling will be conducted by hook-and-line drift fishing in deep-water habitats, with underwater cameras attached to the fishing line. On each fishing trip, three to seven sites will be fished, with the exact number dependent on transit time and weather. At each site, one vertical fishing line will be deployed from the commercial fishing vessel with a surface float and bottom weight for a 30 minute soak time. Twelve #9 hooks will be attached to the bottom two meters of the line and manual snapper reels will be used to retrieve the line. A GoPro camera, encased in a light weight, pressure tested housing, and an LED light will be attached to a small, neutrally buoyant structure. This camera array will be attached to the fishing line at two separate points, with the lower attachment point approximately three meters above the bottom weight.

Project activities will be conducted from the date the EFP is issued, through August 1, 2020. The majority of sampling will occur in September and October of 2019, although it is expected that some sampling will occur in other months of the year. Sampling will occur at the following locations around Puerto Rico:

- Western region – from Isabela to Puerto Real, including Isla de Desecheo Marine Reserve, within 12 miles of any point of land in Puerto Rico, from depths of 100 - 500 m;
- Northeast region – from San Juan to Fajardo, extending out to Isla de Culebra, within 12 miles of any point of land in Puerto Rico, from depths of 100 - 500 m;
- Southeast region – from Patillas to Buena Vista, extending out to Isla de Vieques, within 12 miles of any point of land in Puerto Rico, from depths of 100 - 500 m.

All queen and blackfin snappers will be retained under the EFP, and the gonads and otoliths will be extracted for analysis. Length and weight measurements will be recorded for all targeted and incidental species, except for prohibited species (*i.e.*, goliath and Nassau groupers, and midnight, rainbow, and blue parrotfishes), which will be returned immediately to the water with minimum harm.

Up to 100 specimens of queen and blackfin snappers will be harvested in each of the three regions, each year. Under the EFP, participants will be allowed to fish for and possess these species in or from the Bajo de Sico closed area, which is included in the Western Region, during the closure period (October 1 to March 31). 50 CFR § 622.435(a)(2)(iv). In addition, participants will be able to fish for or possess blackfin snapper during the October 1 through December 31 seasonal closure. 50 CFR § 622.435(a)(1)(iii).

Up to 100 specimens of the following species from each of the three regions will be caught each year, as incidental catch: black, silk, vermilion, and wenchman snappers (Snapper Unit 1); coney, graysby, red hind, and rock hind groupers (Grouper Unit 3); black, red, tiger, and yellowfin groupers (Grouper Unit 4); and misty and yellowedge groupers (Grouper Unit 5). Cardinal snapper, which is in Snapper Unit 2 with queen snapper, may be incidentally caught when targeting queen snapper and these species are commonly caught together. Some of these incidental species (namely, red, black, tiger, yellowfin, yellowedge, or red hind groupers and vermilion, black, or silk snappers) are subject to seasonal closures, 50 CFR § 622.435(a)(1)(i)-(iii), and these species will not be retained during the seasonal closures. The EFP will allow participants to possess the species during those closure periods for sufficient time to collect and record measurements. If these species are caught outside the closed season, the commercial fishers may retain them, consistent with applicable law. These species also may be encountered in the Bajo de Sico closed area, 50 CFR § 622.435(a)(2)(iv), and the EFP allows the participants to possess the species during the seasonal closure in that area for sufficient time to collect and record measurements.



The following reporting and other requirements are included as conditions of this EFP:

- This permit authorizes only the use of hook-and-line (including attached cameras) fishing gear aboard the vessels to collect reef fish. Fishing vessels need to carry proper de-hooking gear on board;
- This authorization does not allow taking of goliath grouper (*Epinephelus itajara*), Nassau grouper (*E. striatus*), or any parrotfish species for which harvest and possession is prohibited (midnight parrotfish, blue parrotfish, or rainbow parrotfish), 50 C.F.R. § 622.434;
- This authorization does not allow anchoring in federal waters of Bajo de Sico at any time and is not providing an exemption from the prohibition in 50 C.F.R. § 622.435(b)(3);
- Submit an annual report summarizing the amount of reef fish species harvested during the seasonal closures and within the exempted closed areas, as well as the total landings during the reporting period, by January 15 of the year following the landings. Report the number of specimens collected (by species), the area collected, and other information relevant to the proposed research activities. Send each annual report to the Regional Administrator, NMFS, Southeast Regional Office, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, Florida 33701-5505 and an electronic copy to sarah.stephenson@noaa.gov; and
- Submit a final report summarizing all reef fish harvested during the project period. Report the number and weight of each reef fish species collected, the corresponding area and date/time that the reef fish were collected, and any other information relevant to the proposed research activities. Send the report to the Regional Administrator, NMFS, Southeast Regional Office, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, Florida 33701-5505 and an electronic copy to sarah.stephenson@noaa.gov.

Upon receipt of this EFP, you must date and sign the permit. The permit is not valid until signed. In signing the permit, you are agreeing to abide by all terms and conditions set forth in the EFP, and all restrictions and relevant regulations. Signing the EFP also acknowledges that the authority to conduct certain activities specified in the permit is conditional and subject to authorization and revocation by the NMFS' Southeast Regional Office Regional Administrator or Southeast Fisheries Science Center Director.

A copy of this EFP shall be maintained onboard each vessel and made available for inspection during sampling operations.

Sincerely,


For  Roy E. Crabtree, Ph.D.
Regional Administrator

cc: F/EN3, SEFSC, CFMC

 11/16/2018
Permit holder signature and date

The following vessels are authorized for sampling under the EFP, granted to:

Katherine Overly, Fisheries Biologist
Riverside Technology Inc. Contractor
NOAA NMFS Panama City Lab
3500 Delwood Beach Dr.
Panama City Beach, FL, 32408

Andrew W. David
Research Fishery Biologist
NOAA Fisheries, Southeast Fisheries Science Center
3500 Delwood Beach Rd.
Panama City, Florida 32408

List of vessels operating under EFP during funded study: Habitat Classification in Puerto Rico's Deep Drop Fishery and Age and Growth of *Etelis oculatus*

Boat Name and Number	Captain/Operators
<i>Tata</i> PR0912AB	Capt. Roberto Silva
<i>La Chely</i> PR2610AC	Capt. Jose Lopez
<i>Mi Familia</i> PR3394FF	Capt. Edwin E. Font