

**National Marine Fisheries Service
Fish/Fisheries Conservation Lab at the University of South Carolina at Aiken
Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP)**

Investigate age, growth, mortality, and reproductive biology of red hind from two marine managed areas off the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI)

This EFP is issued to Dr. Virginia Shervette with the Fish/Fisheries Conservation Lab at the University of South Carolina at Aiken in accordance with procedures established at 50 CFR 600.745(b). The EFP authorizes researchers and commercial fishermen aboard commercial fishing vessels, as listed in Appendix 1, to collect red hind (*Epinephelus guttatus*) in waters of the U.S. Caribbean exclusive economic zone off St. Croix and St. Thomas, USVI as described in the attached Terms and Conditions (Appendix 2).

The EFP exempts the persons aboard the vessels listed in Appendix 1 from regulations found at 50 CFR 622.479 (Seasonal and Area Closures of St. Croix) and 622.514 (Seasonal and Area Closures of St. Thomas and St. John), as described in Appendix 2. This exemption applies to U.S. Caribbean waters under federal jurisdiction. Any collection efforts conducted in waters under the USVI's jurisdiction must comply with the laws and regulations applicable in those waters, including obtaining any necessary authorization from the appropriate government authorities within the Territory.

The EFP is valid from the date of issuance through February 16, 2025, and becomes effective after it is signed by both the Regional Administrator and Dr. Shervette, on the later of the two signature dates (50 CFR 600.745(b)(4)).

All vessels engaging in the activities authorized pursuant to this EFP must have a copy of this EFP on board. As specified in 50 CFR 600.745(b)(9), failure to comply with any of the conditions in Appendix 2 may be grounds for revocation, suspension, or modification of the EFP with respect to all persons and vessels conducting activities under the EFP.

for

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Date Signed

Andrew J. Strelcheck
Regional Administrator
Southeast Regional Office
National Marine Fisheries Service



9 Jan 2025

Signature

Date Signed

Dr. Virginia Shervette, EFP Holder

As set forth in 50 CFR 600.745(b)(4), by signing this document, the EFP Holder agrees to comply with all terms and conditions (outlined in Appendix 2) of this permit, and all restrictions and relevant regulations. This includes agreeing that the owners and crews of the participating vessels (identified in Appendix 1) will comply with the terms and conditions of this permit.

Appendix 1

List of Participating Vessels and Participants in the Fish/Fisheries Conservation Lab at the University of South Carolina at Aiken Exempted Fishing Permit

List of Participating Vessels

<u>Vessel Name</u>	<u>Vessel ID</u>	<u>Owner/Operator</u>
F/V Mary B	VI 4537 TC	Capt. Daniel Basick
F/V Syotos Fishing	VI 2893 CB	Capt. Gerson Martinez

List of Participating Individuals

Virginia Shervette
Jesus M Rivera Hernandez
Rick Nemeth

Appendix 2

Terms and Conditions

Fish/Fisheries Conservation Lab at the University of South Carolina at Aiken Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP)

Investigate age, growth, mortality, and reproductive biology of red hind from two marine managed areas off the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI)

A. PURPOSE.

This EFP will allow researchers and commercial fishermen aboard commercial fishing vessels to harvest a maximum of 60 red hind (*Epinephelus guttatus*) from each of the Hind Bank Marine Conservation District (Hind Bank MCD) in St. Thomas and the Red Hind Spawning Aggregation Area (Lang Bank) in St. Croix, for a total of 120 fish. Harvest of red hind from these sites under this EFP is limited to a 5-day period including the two days before, the day of, and the two days after the full moon in January and February 2025.

B. BACKGROUND.

The project seeks to address critical gaps in red hind demographics and life history, identified as research recommendations in the [Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review 35 final report](#), which could help provide current, region-specific information for red hind. Project objectives include investigating age, growth, mortality, and reproductive biology of red hind from the Hind Bank MCD and Lang Bank management areas, and evaluating the effectiveness of seasonal and area closures through replication of past collections and analysis of temporal trends related to size-at-age, sex ratios, and size/age frequency distributions for red hind during spawning events. By targeting red hind spawning aggregations, the permittee will be better able to collect data on larger sized fish that currently are not readily available. Data collected from this project will be made available for use in future red hind stock assessments that provide guidance and management recommendations to the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Caribbean Fishery Management Council (Council), and the USVI's Department of Fish and Wildlife.

C. SCOPE OF WORK.

Project activities will be conducted in January and February 2025, during the two days before, the day of, and the two days after the full moon each month (see Conditions below). A maximum of 60 red hind will be collected from each site from depths of 82 to 246 feet (25 to 75 meters). Once the maximum number of red hind are obtained from a site, fishing activities at that site must end. During each sampling event (i.e., day), commercial fishermen will use a maximum of four fishing rods, each with up to three hooks. All activities permitted by this EFP will occur in federal waters and while adrift (i.e., no anchoring).

Targeted species include red hind. Non-targeted species expected to be incidentally caught at these sites include: vermilion, blackfin, mutton, and yellowtail snappers; coney, graysby, black grouper, red grouper, and yellowfin grouper; white and bluestriped grunts; hogfish; and queen triggerfish. All incidental catch during sampling activities would be returned to the water in a manner that

minimizes harm to the species, which may include the use of a descending device, if appropriate.

A maximum of 120 red hind may be retained under the EFP. Samples will be stored on ice and transported to a field lab; measured for standard length, fork length, and total length (to the nearest millimeter); and weighed (to the nearest gram). For each sample, otoliths will be removed, rinsed, and stored; gonads will be removed, weighed and preserved; and eyes, muscle, stomachs, and fin clips will be collected and archived for future research. Carcasses will be deposited into deep water in Frenchman’s Bay in St. Thomas and Modoc Landing in St. Croix within 24 hours of processing, where the carcasses can be consumed by tarpon and other fish.

The permittee (see Appendix 1) will be allowed to harvest red hind in or from the year-round Hind Bank MCD area closure and the Lang Bank seasonal closure (December 1 – February 28). All incidental catch will be returned to the water as described above. The catch and harvest of these targeted and non-targeted reef fish species is not expected to impact the reef fish populations. The permittee does not anticipate any interactions with marine mammals, or species or critical habitat protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Reporting requirements under the EFP are included in Section E, below.

D. PERMIT EXEMPTIONS AND CONDITIONS.

NOAA Fisheries has the ability to modify the conditions of the EFP or to end the project, to address bycatch or other issues, as warranted.

Exemptions:

1. 50 CFR 622.479 Area and Seasonal closures (St. Croix)

[50 CFR 622.479\(a\)\(2\)](#) - Red hind spawning aggregation area east of St. Croix. The red hind spawning aggregation area east of St. Croix is bounded by rhumb lines connecting, in order, the points listed in Table 2 to this paragraph (a)(2).

- (i) From December 1 through the last day of February, each year, fishing is prohibited in the red hind spawning aggregation area east of St. Croix.

Table 2 to § 622.479(a)(2)—Red Hind Spawning Aggregation Area East of St. Croix

Point	North latitude	West longitude
A	17°50.2'	64°27.9'
B	17°50.1'	64°26.1'
C	17°49.2'	64°25.8'
D	17°48.6'	64°25.8'
E	17°48.1'	64°26.1'
F	17°47.5'	64°26.9'
A	17°50.2'	64°27.9'

2. 50 CFR 622.514 Area and Seasonal closures (St. Thomas/St. John)

[50 CFR 622.514\(a\)\(2\)](#) - Hind Bank Marine Conservation District (MCD). The Hind Bank MCD is bounded by rhumb lines connecting, in order, the points listed in Table 2 to this

paragraph (a)(2). Fishing for any species and anchoring by fishing vessels is prohibited year-round in those parts of the Hind Bank MCD that are in the EEZ around St. Thomas and St. John.

Table 2 to § 622.514(a)(2)—Hind Bank MCD

Point	North latitude	West longitude
A	18°13.2'	65°06.0'
B	18°13.2'	64°59.0'
C	18°11.8'	64°59.0'
D	18°10.7'	65°06.0'
A	18°13.2'	65°06.0'

Conditions:

1. Project Period. The EFP is valid from the date of issuance through February 16, 2025. The conditions below apply during the project period.
2. Targeted Species. The following number of red hind may be fished for and possessed during the applicable area and seasonal closures.
 - a. Hind Bank MCD area closure - 60 red hind
 - b. Lang Bank seasonal area closure - 60 red hind
3. Non-Targeted Species. All non-targeted species possessed during the applicable area and seasonal closures, which may include vermilion, blackfin, mutton, and yellowtail snappers; coney, graysby, black grouper, red grouper, and yellowfin grouper; white and bluestriped grunts; hogfish; and queen triggerfish, must be returned to the water with a minimum amount of harm. If appropriate, a descending device should be used.
4. Sampling Dates. Sampling in or from the Hind Bank MCD and Lang Bank sites is authorized on January 10-14, 2025, and February 11-15, 2025, during daylight hours only.
5. Sampling locations.
 - a. Sampling in the Hind Bank MCD area is inside the coordinates listed in Table 2 to § 622.514(a)(2), but west of longitude -65.001° W (see Figure 1).
 - b. Sampling in the Lang Bank area is authorized inside the coordinates listed in Table 2 to § 622.479(a)(2).
6. Activities under the EFP must be in compliance with the scope of work, described in Section C above, including:
 - a. Only hook-and-line gear with 2/0-6/0 inline circle hooks is authorized to collect red hind.
 - b. At each site, any red hind caught above the targeted number (n= 60) must be returned to depth in a manner that minimizes harm to the species, which may include the use of a descending device, if appropriate.
 - c. All non-targeted species would be returned to depth in a manner that minimizes harm to the species, which may include the use of a descending device, if appropriate.

- d. Vertical fishing line lengths may not be longer than necessary for the depth fished to ensure that the lower length of the fishing line does not lay flat along the bottom.
 - e. Fishing vessels must carry proper de-hooking tools on board.
 - f. Prohibited reef fish species in federal waters around St. Croix (50 CFR 622.478) and St. Thomas/St. John (50 CFR 622.513) include Nassau and goliath grouper, and midnight, blue, and rainbow parrotfish, which must be avoided and returned to the water immediately with minimum harm. If Nassau grouper or other ESA-listed species are incidentally caught, it must be reported immediately in accordance with the reporting requirements below.
 - g. Anchoring is prohibited in the Hind Bank MCD and must be avoided in the Lang Bank area.
7. Researchers and commercial fishermen participating in the project must avoid fishing where Nassau grouper are likely to aggregate (e.g., the eastern borders of the Hind Bank MCD and the Lang Bank red hind spawning aggregation area).
 8. Each vessel shall carry on board and prominently display the EFP. The EFP must be presented for inspection upon request of any authorized law enforcement officer.

E. REPORTING REQUIREMENTS AND DATA DISSEMINATION.

The EFP holder and all participating vessels agree to the public release of aggregated information obtained as a result of activities conducted under this permit. The EFP holder shall submit the information listed below to NOAA Fisheries in a final report, by **September 30, 2025**, to:

1. Regional Administrator, NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, Florida 33701-5505.
2. Director, NOAA Fisheries Southeast Fisheries Science Center, 75 Virginia Beach Drive, Miami, Florida 33149.
3. An electronic copy to sarah.stephenson@noaa.gov.

The final report must include the following information:

1. Gear
 - a. Detailed description of fishing gear used and total fishing time.
 - b. Report any lost gear.
2. Environmental Conditions
 - a. Date and latitude/longitude for each fishing site.
 - b. General description of each fishing site (e.g., depth, current, temperature, salinity).
 - c. Number of fishing trips by jurisdiction (i.e., federal or territorial).
3. Catch Information
 - a. Bait type used, or specify if no bait is used.

- b. Number, length, weight (if recorded), disposition (kept or discarded), and species identification of all fish caught.
 - c. Number of biological samples collected for the Targeted Species.
4. Protected Species
- a. Number and species identification of all ESA-listed species caught.¹
 - b. Any ESA-listed species interactions must be immediately reported to the NOAA Fisheries Protected Resources Division at 727-824-5312.
 - c. Any entangled marine mammal or incidental injury or mortality to a marine mammal should be reported to the Marine Mammal Authorization Program within 48 hours. Reporting forms can be found at <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/interactions/mmap/>.

F. CONSERVATION RECOMMENDATIONS.

NOAA Fisheries recommends the following best practices, but they are not required as a condition of this permit:

1. Communicate with principal investigators of the Council's Coral Reef Conservation Cooperative Agreement project that is validating acoustics, remote operating vehicles, and dive surveys to ensure that fishing in the Lang Bank management area does not occur while those activities are occurring.
2. Avoid sampling near deployed acoustical (hydrophones) and oceanographic instruments.
3. Avoid sampling during conditions that would increase gear interactions with the bottom (e.g., during high winds or high seas).
4. If ESA-listed species are present at targeted sampling site, then abort or relocate fishing activities.
5. Researchers and commercial fishermen participating in the project should follow [NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office Vessel Strike Avoidance Measures](#).

¹ The list of threatened and endangered species and critical habitat under NMFS jurisdiction for the U.S. Virgin Islands can be found here: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/southeast/consultations/threatened-and-endangered-species-list-us-virgin-islands>.

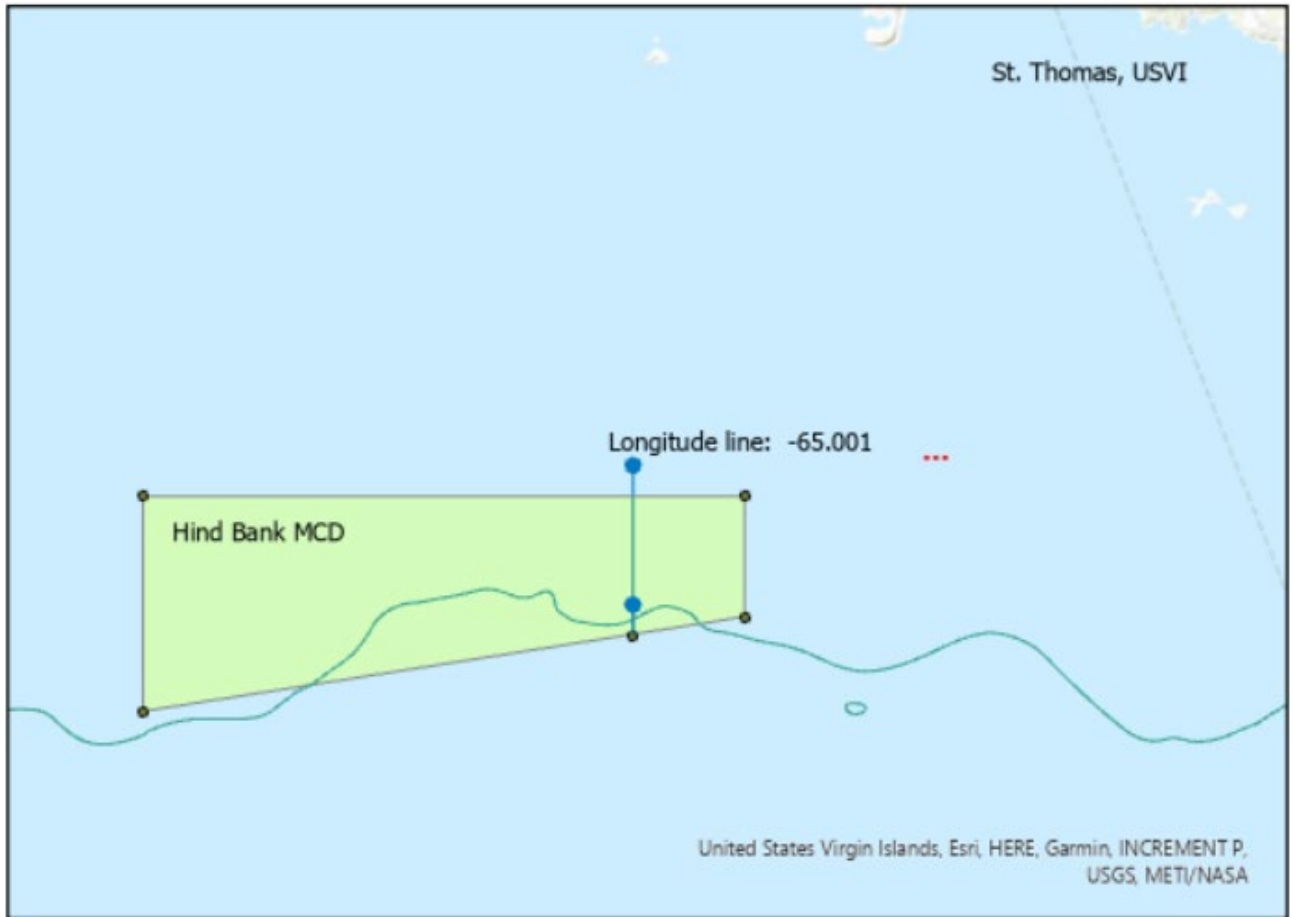


Figure 1. Location of the Hind Bank MCD south of St. Thomas with conditional longitudinal line inside Hind Bank MCD management area. EFP permittees are authorized to fish inside the Hind Bank MCD and west of -65.001° W longitude.