

**GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NORTH CAROLINA  
SESSION 2025**

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**SENATE BILL 977**

Short Title: Moratorium on New Coastal Fishing Regulations. (Public)

Sponsors: Senator Hanig (Primary Sponsor).

Referred to: Rules and Operations of the Senate

May 4, 2026

1 A BILL TO BE ENTITLED  
2 AN ACT TO ESTABLISH A TEMPORARY MORATORIUM ON REGULATORY ACTIONS  
3 AFFECTING COMMERCIAL AND RECREATIONAL FISHING PENDING REVIEW  
4 AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NORTH CAROLINA COLLABORATORY STUDY  
5 OF THE COASTAL AND MARINE FISHERIES OF THE STATE AND TO  
6 REESTABLISH THE JOINT LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION ON SEAFOOD AND  
7 AQUACULTURE.

8 The General Assembly of North Carolina enacts:

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10 **PART I. MORATORIUM ON NEW COASTAL FISHING REGULATIONS**

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12 **LEGISLATIVE FINDINGS AND PURPOSE**

13 **SECTION 1.** Legislative Findings. – The General Assembly finds the following:

- 14 (1) The seafood industry and recreational fishing sector are essential to the  
15 economic stability, food supply, tourism economy, and cultural heritage of the  
16 State.  
17 (2) In 2021, the General Assembly directed the North Carolina Collaboratory to  
18 conduct a study on the overall status of the coastal and marine fisheries  
19 regulated by the State (Collaboratory Study).  
20 (3) The Collaboratory Study is intended to serve as the primary policy guidance  
21 for future coastal and marine fisheries management decisions.  
22 (4) Ongoing regulatory changes and instability have created significant economic  
23 uncertainty for commercial fishermen, charter operators, recreational anglers,  
24 seafood dealers, seafood processors, and related businesses.  
25 (5) A temporary suspension of regulatory expansion is necessary to allow for full  
26 legislative review and consideration of the Collaboratory Study and its  
27 recommendations.

28 **SECTION 2.** Legislative Purpose. – The purpose of this Part is to establish a  
29 comprehensive and enforceable moratorium preventing both direct and indirect regulatory  
30 expansion affecting commercial and recreational fishing activity until the Collaboratory Study  
31 can be fully evaluated by the General Assembly.

32  
33 **COMPREHENSIVE MORATORIUM ON EXPANDING COASTAL FISHERIES**  
34 **REGULATION**

35 **SECTION 3.** Definitions. – In addition to the definitions in G.S. 113-128 and  
36 G.S. 113-129, the following definitions apply to this Part:



- 1 (1) Collaboratory Study. – The study conducted by the North Carolina  
2 Collaboratory on the overall status of the State's coastal and marine fisheries,  
3 as directed by the North Carolina General Assembly pursuant to Section 8.11  
4 of S.L. 2021-180, as amended by Section 2.10 of S.L. 2022-6.
- 5 (2) Recreational fishing. – Any activity preparatory to, during, or subsequent to  
6 the taking of any fish by any means if the purpose of the taking is to obtain  
7 fish that are not to be sold.
- 8 (3) Regulatory action. – Any of the following:
  - 9 a. The adoption or amendment of a rule as provided under Article 2A of  
10 Chapter 150B of the General Statutes.
  - 11 b. The adoption or amendment of a fisheries management plan as  
12 provided in G.S. 113-182.1.
  - 13 c. The implementation of temporary management measures as  
14 authorized by the Secretary of Environmental Quality under  
15 G.S. 113-182.1(e1).
  - 16 d. The issuance of a proclamation by the Fisheries Director in accordance  
17 with authority delegated by the Marine Fisheries Commission under  
18 G.S. 113-221.1.
  - 19 e. The imposition of a condition or limitation in a license authorizing a  
20 person to engage in activities connected with marine and estuarine  
21 resources.
  - 22 f. The implementation of any policy, guidance, or interpretive statement  
23 that purports to have binding legal effect on members of the public.
- 24 (4) Seafood industry. – Any of the following:
  - 25 a. Commercial fishing operations, as defined in G.S. 113-168.
  - 26 b. Fish dealers licensed under G.S. 113-169.3.
  - 27 c. For hire vessels, as defined in G.S. 113-174.
  - 28 d. Marine aquaculture, as defined in G.S. 113-215.
  - 29 e. The cultivation of shellfish, as provided under Article 16 of Chapter  
30 113 of the General Statutes.
  - 31 f. The operation of an ocean fishing pier licensed under G.S. 113-169.4.
  - 32 g. The handling, processing, packaging, and marketing of fishery or  
33 seafood products from coastal fishing waters.
- 34 (5) State marine fisheries agency. – The following agencies or officers charged  
35 with implementing and enforcing the laws related to coastal fishing, coastal  
36 fisheries, and marine and estuarine resources:
  - 37 a. The Division of Marine Resources of the Department of  
38 Environmental Quality.
  - 39 b. The Fisheries Director.
  - 40 c. The Marine Fisheries Commission.
  - 41 d. The Secretary of Environmental Quality.

42 **SECTION 4.** Comprehensive Moratorium on Regulatory Expansion. –  
43 Notwithstanding any provision to the contrary in Subchapter IV of Chapter 113 of the General  
44 Statutes or Part 5D of Article 7 of Chapter 143B of the General Statutes, except as otherwise  
45 provided in Section 8 of this act, no State marine fisheries agency may establish, implement, or  
46 enforce a regulatory action imposing new or expanded restrictions on the seafood industry or on  
47 recreational fishing in the coastal fishing waters. For purposes of this section, "a regulatory action  
48 imposing new or expanded restrictions on the seafood industry or on recreational fishing in the  
49 coastal fishing waters" includes the following:

- 50 (1) Reductions in bag limits, size limits, or trip limits.
- 51 (2) Shortening or eliminating a season for taking fish.

- 1 (3) Closing of coastal fishing waters, whether entirely or only as to the taking of
- 2 particular classes of fish or the use of particular equipment.
- 3 (4) Additional reporting requirements.
- 4 (5) Additional monitoring or observer requirements.
- 5 (6) Additional restrictions on fishing methods or gear.

6 **SECTION 5.** Quota Reallocation Prohibited. – Notwithstanding G.S. 113-221.1,  
7 G.S. 143B-289.52, and any other provision of law to the contrary, no State marine fisheries  
8 agency shall reallocate or modify the harvest quotas allocated to the commercial and recreational  
9 fishing sectors, respectively.

10 **SECTION 6.(a)** Recreational Fishing; 2019 Regulations in Effect. –  
11 Notwithstanding any provision of law to the contrary, except as otherwise provided in Section 8  
12 of this act, for any person engaged in recreational fishing in the coastal fishing waters, the  
13 recreational bag limits, size limits, seasons, and lawful harvest methods that were in effect on  
14 January 1, 2019, shall apply.

15 **SECTION 6.(b)** Fisheries Director; Conforming Proclamations. – No later than 30  
16 days after the effective date of this Part, the Fisheries Director shall issue proclamations  
17 consistent with subsection (a) of this section to restore recreational bag limits, size limits,  
18 seasons, and lawful harvest methods to those that were in effect on January 1, 2019.

19 **SECTION 6.(c)** Marine Fisheries Commission; Conforming Rules. – The Marine  
20 Fisheries Commission shall take all steps necessary to revise its current administrative rules,  
21 guidelines, and policies consistent with subsection (a) of this section to restore recreational bag  
22 limits, size limits, seasons, and lawful harvest methods to those that were in effect on January 1,  
23 2019.

24 **SECTION 7.** Anti-Circumvention. – No State marine fisheries agency shall take any  
25 actions or series of actions to avoid the requirements of this Part or to circumvent its purpose and  
26 intent, including through (i) the reinterpretation of existing rules or fisheries management plans  
27 or (ii) the implementation and development of adaptive management measures.

28 **SECTION 8.(a)** Limited Exceptions; Federal Compliance. – A State marine fisheries  
29 agency may take regulatory actions that would otherwise be prohibited under this Part if strictly  
30 necessary to comply with a condition imposed on the receipt of federal funds, or to implement  
31 or comply with federal law, including:

- 32 (1) The Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act, 16 U.S.C. §
- 33 5101 et seq.
- 34 (2) The Clean Water Act, 33 U.S.C. § 1251 et seq.
- 35 (3) The Endangered Species Act of 1973, 16 U.S.C. § 1531 et seq.
- 36 (4) The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, 16
- 37 U.S.C. § 1801 et seq.
- 38 (5) The Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, 16 U.S.C. § 1361 et seq.
- 39 (6) The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, 16 U.S.C. § 703 et seq.

40 **SECTION 8.(b)** Additional Provisions; Federal Compliance. – Any regulatory  
41 action taken by a State marine fisheries agency in accordance with subsection (a) of this section  
42 shall be narrowly tailored to the purpose of complying with federal law or conditions imposed  
43 on the receipt of federal funds. Any new or expanded restrictions implemented under subsection  
44 (a) of this section shall be the minimum necessary to maintain compliance. Whenever a State  
45 marine fisheries agency proposes a regulatory action under the federal compliance exception in  
46 subsection (a) of this section, the agency shall prepare a written statement that identifies the  
47 federal law requiring the proposed regulatory action and sets forth the reasons why the proposed  
48 regulatory action is required by federal law.

49 **SECTION 8.(c)** Limited Exception; Emergency Response. – A State marine  
50 fisheries agency may take regulatory actions that would otherwise be prohibited under this Part  
51 if strictly necessary for any of the following purposes:

- 1 (1) To protect against imminent threats to public health and safety.
- 2 (2) To respond to a declared state of emergency in accordance with Chapter 166A
- 3 of the General Statutes.
- 4 (3) To prevent catastrophic loss of marine and estuarine resources.
- 5 (4) To address fishery collapse as confirmed by peer-reviewed stock assessments.
- 6 (5) To prevent imminent loss of access by residents to fisheries under federal
- 7 management jurisdiction.

8 **SECTION 8.(d)** Additional Provisions; Emergency Response. – Any regulatory  
9 action taken by a State marine fisheries agency in accordance with subsection (c) of this section  
10 shall be narrowly tailored to the purpose of addressing the pending emergency situation. Any  
11 new or expanded restrictions implemented under subsection (c) of this section shall be the  
12 minimum necessary to sufficiently address the emergency. As soon as practicable following the  
13 proposal or implementation of a regulatory action under the emergency response exception in  
14 subsection (c) of this section, a State marine fisheries agency shall prepare a written statement  
15 that identifies the emergency situation requiring the regulatory action and sets forth the reasons  
16 why the regulatory action is necessary to address the emergency.

17 **SECTION 8.(e)** Expiration; Excepted Regulatory Actions. – A regulatory action  
18 authorized under this section shall expire no later than 180 days following its effective date.

19 **SECTION 9.** Judicial Review. – Any person aggrieved by a regulatory action taken  
20 by a State marine fisheries agency in violation of this Part may petition for judicial review in the  
21 Wake County Superior Court. Article 4 of Chapter 150B of the General Statutes governs judicial  
22 review of a regulatory action under this Part. In any action arising under this section, the Court  
23 may award costs and reasonable attorneys' fees to the prevailing party.

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## 25 **DIVISION OF MARINE FISHERIES' PROGRESS REPORT ON IMPLEMENTING**

## 26 **RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COLLABORATORY STUDY**

27 **SECTION 10.(a)** Division of Marine Fisheries; Biannual Report. – Beginning on  
28 September 1, 2026, the Division of Marine Fisheries shall report biannually to the Joint  
29 Legislative Oversight Committee on Agriculture and Natural and Economic Resources on its  
30 progress related to its review and implementation of the recommendations from the  
31 Collaboratory Study. The report shall include (i) a summary of the Division's determinations  
32 regarding the recommendations and findings in the Collaboratory Study, (ii) a description of any  
33 current or near-term actions to be taken by the Division to implement the recommendations in  
34 the Collaboratory Study, and (iii) an assessment of any long-term planning being considered by  
35 the Division in response to the recommendations and findings in the Collaboratory Study.

36 **SECTION 10.(b)** There is appropriated from the General Fund to the Department of  
37 Environmental Quality the sum of ten thousand dollars (\$10,000) in nonrecurring funds for the  
38 2026-2027 fiscal year to be used by the Department's Division of Marine Fisheries to produce  
39 the reports required by subsection (a) of this section.

40 **SECTION 10.(c)** This section becomes effective July 1, 2026.

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## 42 **MORATORIUM EFFECTIVE DATE AND EXPIRATION**

43 **SECTION 11.** Effective Date. – Except as otherwise provided, this Part is effective  
44 when it becomes law and expires January 1, 2037.

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## 46 **PART II. REESTABLISHMENT OF THE JOINT LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION ON**

## 47 **SEAFOOD AND AQUACULTURE**

48 **SECTION 12.** Chapter 120 of the General Statutes is amended by adding a new  
49 Article to read:

50

"Article 12T.

51

"Joint Legislative Commission on Seafood and Aquaculture.

1 **"§ 120-70.175. Commission established.**

2 The Joint Legislative Commission on Seafood and Aquaculture is hereby established as a  
3 permanent joint committee of the General Assembly. As used in this Article, the term  
4 "Commission" means the Joint Legislative Commission on Seafood and Aquaculture.

5 **"§ 120-70.176. Membership; cochair; vacancies; quorum.**

6 (a) The Joint Legislative Commission on Seafood and Aquaculture shall consist of 15  
7 members: four Senators appointed by the President Pro Tempore of the Senate; four  
8 Representatives appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives; four members  
9 appointed by the Governor; and three members appointed by the Commissioner of Agriculture.  
10 The members shall serve at the pleasure of their appointing officer.

11 (b) The President Pro Tempore of the Senate shall designate one Senator to serve as  
12 cochair, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives shall designate one Representative to  
13 serve as cochair.

14 (c) Except as otherwise provided in this section, a legislative member of the Commission  
15 shall serve for so long as the member remains a member of the General Assembly and no  
16 successor has been appointed. A member of the General Assembly who does not seek reelection  
17 or is not reelected to the General Assembly may complete a term of service on the Commission  
18 until the day on which a new General Assembly convenes. A legislative member of the  
19 Commission who resigns or is removed from service in the General Assembly shall be deemed  
20 to have resigned or been removed from office on the Commission. Any vacancy that occurs on  
21 the Commission shall be filled in the same manner as the original appointment.

22 (d) A quorum of the Commission shall consist of eight members.

23 **"§ 120-70.177. Powers and duties.**

24 The Commission shall have the following powers and duties:

- 25 (1) To monitor and study the current seafood industry in North Carolina,  
26 including studies of the feasibility of increasing the State's production,  
27 processing, and marketing of seafood.
- 28 (2) To study the potential for increasing the role of aquaculture in all regions of  
29 the State.
- 30 (3) To evaluate the feasibility of creating a central permitting office for fishing  
31 and aquaculture matters.
- 32 (4) To evaluate actions of the Division of Marine Fisheries of the Department of  
33 Environmental Quality, the Wildlife Resources Commission, and of any other  
34 board, commission, department, or agency of the State or local government as  
35 such actions relate to the seafood and aquaculture industries.
- 36 (5) To make recommendations regarding regulatory matters relating to the  
37 seafood and aquaculture industries, including:
- 38 a. Increasing the State's representation and decision-making ability by  
39 dividing the State between the Atlantic and South Atlantic regions of  
40 the National Division of Marine Fisheries.
- 41 b. Evaluating the necessity to substantially increase penalties for trespass  
42 and theft of shellfish and other aquaculture products.
- 43 (6) To review and evaluate changes in federal law and regulations, relevant court  
44 decisions, and changes in technology affecting the seafood and aquaculture  
45 industries.
- 46 (7) To review existing and proposed State law and rules affecting the seafood and  
47 aquaculture industries and to determine whether any modification of law or  
48 rules is in the public interest.
- 49 (8) To make reports and recommendations, including draft legislation, to the  
50 General Assembly from time to time as to any matter relating to the powers  
51 and duties set out in this section.

1           (9)     To undertake such additional studies as it deems appropriate or as may from  
2           time to time be requested by the President of the Senate, the President Pro  
3           Tempore of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, either  
4           house of the General Assembly, the Legislative Research Commission, or the  
5           Joint Legislative Commission on Governmental Operations and to make such  
6           reports and recommendations to the General Assembly regarding such studies  
7           as it deems appropriate.

8     **"§ 120-70.178. Additional powers.**

9           (a)     The Commission, while in the discharge of official duties, may exercise all the powers  
10          of a joint committee of the General Assembly provided for under the provisions of G.S. 120-19  
11          and G.S. 120-19.1 through G.S. 120-19.4. The Commission may meet at any time upon the call  
12          of either cochair, whether or not the General Assembly is in session. The Commission may meet  
13          in the Legislative Building or the Legislative Office Building upon the approval of the Legislative  
14          Services Commission.

15          (b)     The Commission may contract for consultants or hire employees in accordance with  
16          G.S. 120-32.02.

17     **"§ 120-70.179. Compensation and expenses of members.**

18          Members of the Commission shall receive per diem and travel allowances in accordance with  
19          G.S. 120-3.1 for members who are legislators and shall receive compensation and per diem and  
20          travel allowances in accordance with G.S. 138-5 for members who are not legislators.

21     **"§ 120-70.180. Staffing.**

22          The Legislative Services Officer shall assign as staff to the Commission professional  
23          employees of the General Assembly, as approved by the Legislative Services Commission.  
24          Clerical staff shall be assigned to the Commission through the offices of the Directors of  
25          Legislative Assistants of the Senate and House of Representatives. The expenses of employment  
26          of clerical staff shall be borne by the Commission.

27     **"§ 120-70.181. Funding.**

28          From funds available to the General Assembly, the Legislative Services Commission shall  
29          allocate monies to fund the Joint Legislative Commission on Seafood and Aquaculture."  
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31     **PART III. SEVERABILITY AND EFFECTIVE DATE**

32           **SECTION 13.** Severability. – If any provision of this act or its application is held  
33           invalid, the invalidity does not affect other provisions or applications of this act that can be given  
34           effect without the invalid provisions or application and, to this end, the provisions of this act are  
35           severable.

36           **SECTION 14.** Effective Date. – Except as otherwise provided, this act is effective  
37           when it becomes law.