

NOAA researchers hope to bring red porgy to a table near you

Scientists at NOAA's Beaufort Lab are working hard to one day add a small red fish with an odd name to seafood menus nationwide.

Red porgy, a marine fish in the snapper-grouper family in the Atlantic Ocean, is considered overfished according to NOAA Fisheries, the federal agency charged with managing marine fish stocks. The wild red porgy fishery is currently managed as limited entry with strict harvest regulations. Because wild stocks are limited and market values are high, red porgy has emerged a great candidate for aquaculture, also known as fish-farming.

James Morris, a National Ocean Service researcher in Beaufort, NC, along with researchers from UNC-Wilmington's Center for Marine Science, is exploring the feasibility of farming red porgy. Morris and colleagues are the first in the U.S. to clear a major hurdle by successfully spawning wild red porgy in the laboratory and are now raising offspring to fingerling size. If they can optimize hatchery technologies and lower fingerling production costs, red porgy may soon be ready for pilot-scale farming in net pens or in tanks.



A lucky angler displays his red porgy, a rare catch that may soon become more available thanks to aquaculture research being done at NOAA. [Photo credit: John Stout]

Aquaculture is the fastest-growing form of food production in the world and will likely continue growing to meet future seafood demands. Currently, the U.S. imports more than 80% of its seafood from other countries, half of which is farmed, creating an annual seafood trade deficit over \$9 billion. NOAA believes that sustainable wild marine fisheries complemented by robust domestic aquaculture production can help reduce this seafood trade deficit, create jobs in coastal communities, and provide local, safe, nutritious seafood to U.S. consumers.

The red porgy study is just one of several research projects focused on candidate finfish species for aquaculture. Other fish that one day may be commercially farmed include black sea bass and California yellowtail, among others. Successful commercial aquaculture operations in U.S. oceans currently include moi (Pacific threadfin) and kahala (Hawaiian yellowtail) in Hawaii, and cobia in Puerto Rico. Atlantic salmon have historically been a staple of commercial marine fish farming, but only a small percentage of worldwide farmed salmon comes from U.S. waters.

Although only time will tell, efforts to end overfishing and rebuild red porgy stocks by stricter regulations appear to be working. In the meantime, red porgy aquaculture research could help provide much-needed relief for wild stocks while providing a consistent, reliable source of tasty seafood for human consumption in the future.