

Dungeness crab fishery delayed till after the new year as whale entanglements hit a six-year high

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Preliminary data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reports 34 whales were found entangled in fishing gear off the West Coast in 2024, the highest number reported since 2018.

The California Dungeness crab fishery has been associated with the most confirmed entanglements, though a California Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group made up of fishermen, marine biologists, environmental group representatives and scientists and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife have been working the last several years to reduce the number of whales that get themselves snarled in gear.

One change has been to implement criteria for when the crab fishing season can start off in California based on whether whales are spotted in the area. The wildlife department has pushed the opening date of the commercial season three times this year, but now has set Jan. 5 for when fishers can drop their pots in waters between the Sonoma-Mendocino county line and the U.S.-Mexico border. Recreational crabbers will be allowed an earlier start on Jan. 2.

This season, the fifth since the new criteria were established, will not only be among the shortest, but hauling the crabs from the ocean depth will have to be done with half the usual amount of gear in the fishing zones off Central and Southern California.

"Making the decision on when to open is never an easy one," said Charlton Bonham, director of the wildlife agency, adding that his goal is always to balance the needs of the fishery and the safety of the whales.

"It requires careful consideration of the need to protect [endangered species](#) while sustaining the livelihood of California's fishing communities."

Officials with the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations said the industry does its best to avoid whales and has accepted limiting the seasons, but noted that since the restrictions have been in place, the industry has dropped from 450 active vessels to fewer than 100 and has lost out on tens of millions of dollars. It's averaged about \$45 million in

revenue annually over the last five years.

"Delays are difficult, and fisheries management is becoming increasingly complex," Lisa Damrosch, the fishing association's executive director, said.

"Commercial fishing representatives remain committed to being productive partners in finding workable, long-term solutions, and we very much appreciate (the wildlife department's) hard work and commitment to collaborating with the industry to set an opening date that balances harvest opportunities with the need to reduce risks to marine mammals."

In recent years, the reduction in traps has helped, and Bonham said he hopes the extra delay in starting the season now will save more whales. Before the restrictions were put in place, most crabbers headed out in mid-November to prepare for December, when the delectable crustacean meat is a favorite for many holiday festivities. In 2019, Bonham pushed the start date from Nov. 15 to Nov. 22.

The delay has led many seafood markets, restaurants and grocery stores to other sources to meet the holiday demand, often getting crabs from fisheries that operate off Oregon and Washington and paying more for the tasty crustacean to be flown or trucked in from further away.

Shala Mansur-O'Keefe, who operates Jon's Fish Market in Dana Point Harbor, said she turned to Oregon crabbers again this year, where the season began on Dec. 16.

"I tried to get information about California crabs from a few people, but no one could tell me what was going on," she said. "I started asking around early December and got a lot of people telling me the season won't open by Christmas. So I called a few of my salmon fishermen in

Washington and Oregon, who were willing to supply me."

"So far, we've been able to fill any and all preorders coming in," she said.

Santa Monica Seafood, one of the largest suppliers of fresh seafood on the West Coast, also turned to Oregon suppliers for its holiday orders. Soon, it will look to Washington crabbers and then to its California sources once the season opens, said Alfredo Chavez, a spokesman for the company, adding that most customers prefer the California crabs.

Due to supply constraints this year, he said the company is experiencing a roughly 50% reduction in Dungeness crab sales compared to previous years.

To determine the start of the crabbing season, spotters in planes and boats scour the ocean across six zones of the California coast along the continental shelf. If too many animals are sighted, the start of the recreational and commercial Dungeness crab fishing season is delayed.

The NOAA surveys still showed large numbers of humpback whales off the central coast during the most recent aerial survey in early December, but fewer than previous surveys. The whales look for anchovies near the shore, where many vertical fishing lines connecting crab pots to buoys would be dropped.

"I think most of the whales have likely left for feeding grounds by now," said Geoff Shester, a senior scientist for Oceana and a member of the California Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group. "But we've seen juveniles that stay year-round in recent years. So the risk is lower now, but not zero."

This year's Dungeness fishery opener builds off five years of efforts,

including aerial surveys covering more than 20,000 miles of California's coast, wildlife officials said.

California has also invested more than \$6 million to address entanglement risk through the Fish and Wildlife department and the California Ocean Protection Council, including developing new tools to evaluate risk and expanding alternative gear testing.

The cause behind this year's higher entanglement numbers off the West Coast—Oregon and Washington also had higher numbers—is unknown, but could have something to do with the animals feeding closer to the shore, wildlife experts said.

"What this tells us is, despite the precautions taken on the central California coast, there are still far too many vertical fishing lines in the water when whales are here," Shester said, adding that entanglements seen by the public represent only a fraction of those that occur.

In 2023, there were 27 confirmed entangled whales.

"The numbers may fluctuate year to year, but have consistently been well above levels that harm the recovery of endangered humpbacks off the West Coast," he said.

Studies by NOAA indicate that about 75% of entanglements result in death because the heavy weight of the lines and pots wrap around the whales, bogging them down, slicing their flukes and restricting their mouths.

This spring, the California Fish and Wildlife Commission will expand the use of alternative gear—it stores the line and the buoy with the trap on the sea floor until fishermen are ready to retrieve it, eliminating vertical lines in the water—by doubling the number of crabbers that can

use the newer system.

"Last year's test showed that pop-up gear enables crabbers to profitably continue crabbing fishing during the spring with high reliability and minimal gear loss, all while being whale-safe," Shester said. "Most crabbers recouped the cost of the pop-up gear in a single fishing trip, then went on to make a profit."

Noah Blom, executive chef at Arc Butcher & Baker, is all about whale-safe and high-quality seafood at his restaurant.

Dungeness crab is his favorite crab meat; he uses it often in dishes and said he makes sure that anything served at his Newport Beach restaurant is sustainably caught.

"We always pay more," Blom said. "The ones we use know their spots, and it's not about throwing thousands of cages down on the ocean floor and not caring."

Currently, his crab cake entree sells for \$42. The dish is among his more popular ones, he said.

While Blom doesn't always list his crab entrees as Dungeness, he prefers to use the species because the meat is sweeter and because they are from the West Coast.

"I'm very particular about sourcing," he said. "Crab is a specialty item. It's supposed to be high-end. You can splurge once in a while or if you have money, you can buy it often. I just don't think having sub-par practices to make something less expensive is ever the best way to do anything. It's just not really the American way."

"It's our planet; we always want to take good care of it."

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