

## Dungeness Crab fishing season will open in the new year

January 4, 2024



The California Department of Fish and Wildlife announced the commercial Dungeness crab fishing season will start January 5 for fishing zones 1 and 2 (from the Sonoma/Mendocino County line to the Oregon/California border), while continuing the delay in fishing zones 3-6 (south of Sonoma/Mendocino County).

The commercial opener has experienced multiple delays this season due to a combination of excessive humpback whale entanglements and high numbers of whale sightings — according to the Risk Assessment and Mitigation Program criteria — plus a recent death of an endangered Pacific leatherback sea turtle that was entangled and drowned in commercial crabbing gear.

The recreational fishery opened on November 4 with hoop nets, and the recreational crab trap prohibition was lifted for fishing zone 1 — the northern most waters off California. Recreational crab traps are still prohibited in zones 3 and 4 off the Central Coast.

Ashley Blacow-Draeger, Oceana’s Pacific Policy and Communications Manager, released the following statement:

“We support the decision by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife that balances the financial considerations of fishermen while ensuring that whales off California can safely complete their seasonal migrations. El Niño conditions are predicted this spring, which is likely to drive humpback whales closer to

shore as they follow their prey — like anchovy — into shallower waters as the whales return to California from winter breeding grounds.

This could force an early end to an already compressed fishing season as thousands of vertical fishing lines in the water impede whales from safely swimming and feeding. Pop-up gear can provide fishermen with additional financial opportunities in the spring by offering Californians crab caught in a way that is whale and sea turtle safe when waters may otherwise be closed to conventional crab traps. We commend the fishermen, enforcement officers, gear manufacturers, and fishery managers who are collaborating to scale up pop-up gear testing in the spring.”

The next assessment is scheduled for around January 11 to determine whether trap limits in Northern California can be removed and if commercial fishing off the remainder of the state may convene.

## **Background**

According to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), roughly 75 percent of reported whale entanglements are fatal as whales can drag the heavy fishing gear for months, hindering their ability to dive and feed. This can result in malnutrition, starvation, infection to damaged flukes and even severed appendages and drowning.

According to CDFW, there have been 16 confirmed whale entanglements — including humpback whales and gray whales — reported off California this year, four of which were confirmed in California commercial Dungeness crab gear. This includes a recent sighting of a humpback whale reported entangled on November 11 in Monterey Bay and confirmed to be in California commercial Dungeness crab gear. To date, at least 24 whales have been confirmed entangled off the West Coast in 2023.

Additionally, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife confirmed that a critically endangered Pacific leatherback sea turtle was recently observed entangled and killed in California commercial Dungeness crab gear off the Farallon Islands.

The population of humpback whales that breeds in Central American/Southern Mexico — one of two humpback populations that migrates to feed off the California coast — is endangered with extinction under the federal Endangered Species Act. According to NMFS, these humpbacks are being seriously injured or killed at a rate of four times their “Potential Biological Removal,” which is the legal threshold above which there are population-level impacts that impede recovery of the species in accordance with the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Humpback whales are also being caught by California commercial Dungeness crab gear in numbers that greatly exceed a three-year average impact score as defined in California’s Risk Assessment Mitigation Program for the fishery that triggers necessary management action.

Due to the number of entanglements, NMFS is proposing to upgrade the California commercial Dungeness crab fishery to a Category I fishery—a designation reserved for fisheries that have a frequent likelihood of seriously injuring or killing marine mammals.

The federal agency is also considering including the Dungeness crab fishery in the scope of a new “Take Reduction Team” that would develop a plan to swiftly reduce serious injury and death of whales from entanglement as required by the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Pop-up gear is a successful way to catch crab in a way that is whale and sea turtle safe. The gear stores the rope and buoy with a string of traps connected by a groundline on the seafloor until fishermen are ready to retrieve the gear. This removes the entanglement risk posed by conventional gear where vertical fishing lines are untended in the water for up to four days.

*For more information on Oceana’s campaign to prevent entanglements off the U.S. West Coast visit [www.oceana.org/whalesafeoceans](http://www.oceana.org/whalesafeoceans)*