

First month of Dungeness crabbing disappointing, Quality and size is ‘really, really good’

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The Dungeness Crabbing season is off to a slow start in Crescent City and Brookings, Ore., this year and the recent turbulent weather has only complicated matters.

“We’ve had a lot of bad weather, not too many days out fishing,” said Russ Burkman, owner of Pacific Ocean Harvesters in Brookings.

But what is being caught “the quality is awesome. It has been really, really good,” Burkman said.

Fishermen were anxious to begin crab fishing when the season opened on Dec. 31, after being delayed twice due to the crab quality. So far, the season has been disappointing, yielding a low overall poundage of crabs, according to Crescent City Harbor Commissioner Rick Shepherd and Burkman.

It is not the worst year Crescent City and Brookings has seen, but it’s certainly not the best.

“It’s not a horrible year, but it’s not a banner year by any means,” Burkman said. “Not as many crabs as in past years.”

Burkman did not know exactly why there were less crabs in the region adding that “it’s just different from year to year.”

Despite this, since many boats went down the California coast to avoid the season delay, fishermen who stayed local may catch the amount they would on an average year. Without the common fleet of 200 crabbing boats, the smaller numbers have raked in close to their usual share, or at least the larger boats have.

“If we had a whole bunch of boats, nobody would have caught anything, but this is the least amount of boats I ever can remember,” Shepherd, who has fished in Crescent City for 40 years, said.

In the past, fishermen could find the crabs closer to the harbor, but this year, the crabs were farther out in the ocean and more difficult to reach. With the King Tide waves and stormy weather this January, mostly larger crabbing boats have been able to brave the elements to pursue their catch.

“Weather has been really bad, so that hurts some of the smaller boats. Some of the large boats might have a better season because they’ve had been allowed to fish,” Shepherd said.

Another issue fishermen are facing this year is the price of the crab. Though the price increased slightly this week – most likely for Chinese New Year, a big seafood holiday — it has remained stagnant.

Usually, when crab production, the amount caught, slows down, the price increases to compensate for fewer crabs. It’s a simple supply and demand situation. Yet, this year, for an unknown reason, production has gone down, but the price didn’t spike up with it.

To add to the frustration, the crabs they have been selling have been great quality with a high percentage of meat on them.

“The quality of the crab has been tremendous. Crabs averaged two pounds plus, which is really rare for this area to have that large of crab,” Shepherd said. “[Some] fishermen feel like they should have been worth more money.”

Though the season has not provided the bounty hoped for, only the first month of the season has passed, and fishermen still have a few more months to set their crabbing pots.