

California commercial Dungeness crab fishing season delayed

November 7, 2023



The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) announced a delay in the season opener for California commercial Dungeness crab fishing off the Central and Southern Coast to protect whales from entanglement.

The decision is based on a combination of excessive humpback whale entanglements in California Dungeness crab gear over the last three years and high numbers of recent humpback whale sightings off the central coast according to CDFW's Risk Assessment and Mitigation Program criteria.

The recreational Dungeness crab fishery will open statewide on November 4; however, recreational crab traps will not be allowed for the Central Coast (Fishing Zones 3 and 4) due to the high abundance of whales.

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 or tails and even severed

appendages and drowning. According to CDFW, there have been 15 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. As of September, 23 whales have been confirmed entangled off the West Coast in 2023.

The population of humpback whales that breeds in Central American/Southern Mexico — one of two humpback populations that migrates here 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 by fisheries and ship strikes at a rate well above levels that impact the health of the population. Humpback whales are also being caught in numbers that greatly exceed a three-year average impact score as defined in California's Risk Assessment Mitigation Program for the commercial Dungeness crab fishery that triggers necessary management action.

Due to 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.

The next assessment to determine the risk of whale entanglements and determine whether fishing zones will open December 1 is scheduled for around November 17.

Dr. Geoff Shester, Oceana's California campaign director and senior scientist, and a member of the California Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group, issued the following statement:

“We support the decision by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to protect humpback whales from entanglement, providing them with safe feeding grounds off the California coast. While previous fishery closures have undoubtedly reduced interactions, too many humpbacks are still being entangled. The recent whale entanglement numbers have exceeded triggers for management actions and will make it difficult for the state to acquire take authorizations under the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. For this reason, stricter protections to prevent entanglements are needed as California updates its regulations next year. We remain committed to finding the best solutions that ensure a healthy crab fishery and safer passage for wildlife off our shores.”

Pop-up fishing gear is a way to prevent whale entanglements while providing additional fishing opportunities, particularly during spring months when areas are closed to conventional crab gear. Pop-up gear stores the rope and buoy with the trap on the seafloor until fishermen are ready to retrieve the gear. Last spring, fishermen were successful in testing hundreds of trials of Sub Sea Sonics pop-up systems under experimental fishing permits. A larger, commercial scale testing is planned for Spring 2024 to enable authorization of the gear as alternative gear by 2025. We commend the fishermen who are pioneering the development of this innovative gear to expand whale-safe fishing opportunities during the spring season.

The CDFW's map of Dungeness crab fishing zones is available [here](#).

For more information on Oceana's campaign to prevent entanglements off the U.S. West Coast visit www.oceana.org/whalesafeoceans