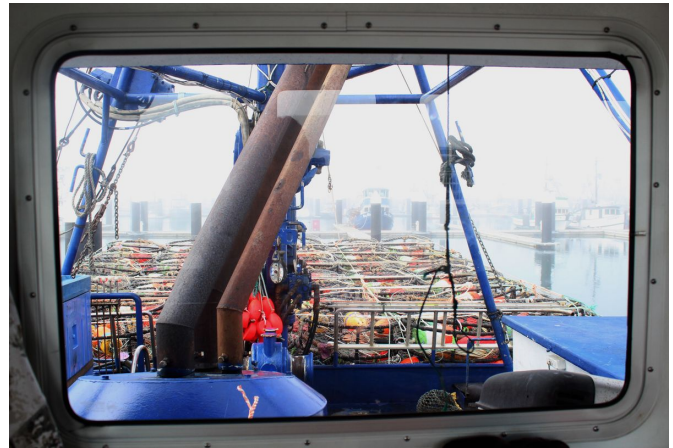


Crab season's delay causing instability

November 18, 2019



Randy Smith stood on the harbor sidewalk talking with a group of fellow fishermen, their large commercial fishing boats - piled high with empty crab traps - swaying at the docks.

They had hoped to be fishing by now, but instead are left deciding where to go.

Smith's crew of five had planned to fish in their home waters during the holidays, but with the crabbing season delayed, they're preparing for two months down south in his boat, the Mistasea.

The commercial Dungeness crab season on the northern California coast, originally scheduled to begin Dec. 1, has been delayed due to poor-quality crab conditions. It will tentatively open Dec. 16, according to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW).

"My crew, instead of waiting until Dec. 15 here, they're glad we're leaving. We'll go start wherever we can earlier," Smith said.

The northern California coast's crab season, in an area that includes Del Norte, Humboldt and Mendocino counties, is delayed because the crabs' meat has not met the required percentage. Crabs in all three districts must meet assorted regulations for the season to open, according to Christy Juhasz, a CDFW environmental scientist.

With the Tri-State protocol, which applies to the northern California coast, Oregon and Washington, quality tests are conducted every two weeks. Based on the results, the season can be delayed in 15-day increments, said Juhasz.

If the crab do not meet the requirements in their next upcoming test, the season will be delayed another 15 days.

The season start date is determined by a number of different factors. CDFW researchers and scientists look at the percentage of meat growth on the crab shell, as the crabs have to grow large enough. They monitor whale locations in relation to crab locations, to avoid whale entanglement. And the California Department of Public Health has to test crabs for domoic acid, which can be dangerous for human consumption.

All of these factors can play into a seasonal delay, according to Jordan Traverso, deputy director of communications for CDFW.

The last two Dungeness crabbing seasons have been delayed in the northern coast because of quality and domoic acid. Despite this, fishermen caught over 13 million crabs in the northern coastal regions in the 2018-2019 season.

Smith and his crew strive to catch around 100,000 lbs. a season, but they cut their season short to start shrimp fishing each April. Other fishermen pursue crabbing into July.

But right now, both groups are at a standstill, waiting for the go-ahead to start their season. “What’s the right move and how do we get started earlier... That indecision is really hard on these families, you know,” Smith said.

Many fishermen, Smith included, will travel south to the Bay Area to get a start on the season where the original start date is Nov. 15. Due to a crab with domoic acid, that season was delayed until Nov. 22 – although even that date remains tentative.

This year, Smith and other north coast fishermen face a predicament with the season’s delay. Usually, they head south for a couple of weeks to get a head start, then return home to fish. But when seasons are delayed, a 30-day protection comes into play.

That prohibits fishermen who are from, or who traveled to, other areas from fishing in the county for 30 days after the opening.

“It affords the guys that stay home a chance to have a little bit of a season before they’re bombarded by everybody that travels, which is good for the guys that don’t want to travel or can’t. It’s not so great for guys who want to come home,” Smith said.

Those who travel south will not be able to return home to fish for 30 days, so they will have to plan on an extended expedition on the central coast. Some fishermen choose to opt out of the travel and wait at home, but if they do, they face the possibility of missing holiday crab sales.

“The holidays are really important for the live sales,” Smith said. “Chinese New Year’s, all those things affect the market. China’s a big buyer now of our product, so if we lose all those live sales, then it changes the price we end up with.”