

## Ropeless fishing gear for California Dungeness Crab will expand this spring

March 17, 2024



Last week the California Ocean Protection Council (OPC) authorized new funding to address whale and sea turtle entanglements, including up to \$650,000 to advance the use and authorization of new innovative “ropeless” fishing gear in the state’s Dungeness crab fishery.

Whale and sea turtle entanglements are an ongoing concern in California, as numbers remain high despite new measures designed to reduce harm and injury to wildlife. Ropeless gear allows for crab fishing without the threat of entanglement. Initial tests of ropeless gear have been ongoing since 2018, but until recently, few fishermen had been interested in using ropeless gear. Recent years have seen crab fishing closed on some or all of the California coast during conventional fishing months to prevent entanglements.

This year’s season was delayed but is currently open coastwide with a 50% gear reduction in certain areas and a fleet advisory for the entire coast. Today’s unanimous vote supports expansion of a ropeless fishing gear library making gear available for testing.

Once the funds are available, up to \$250,000 will go to purchase Sub Sea Sonics and Guardian Ropeless System gear to be added to the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation's gear library for use and testing. This investment comes at a critical time to help support the current 20 Dungeness crab fishermen that have received approval to participate in a government-approved test of the gear this spring when areas are closed to conventional crab fishing gear.

If the gear proves successful, it could be authorized as soon as next year for use by all California commercial Dungeness crab fishermen, providing an opportunity to continue fishing in the springtime when areas are closed to conventional gear. "Ropeless gear is part of California's crab fishing future, one where consumers can know they're enjoying 'whale-safe crab' and fishermen can catch crab more often and with far less risk to ocean wildlife," said Geoff Shester, Oceana's California campaign director and senior scientist and a member of the California Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group.

"The investments approved today support a sea change in fishermen's interest in using ropeless gear and state support for testing it. We hope to see the gear fully authorized next year, so that all crab fishermen have the option to continue fishing in the spring months when the fishery would otherwise be closed.

We commend the Ocean Protection Council for supporting fishing practices that ensure whales and sea turtles can safely feed and migrate off the California coast."

"On behalf of our company and all the fishermen that have stepped forward to try out this gear, we are sincerely grateful to the Ocean Protection Council for taking this important step toward supporting the reopening of the spring Dungeness crab fishery," said Bart Chadwick, the CEO of Sub Sea Sonics who is overseeing the testing effort and manufacturing his company's innovative ropeless gear. "We look forward to seeing crab boats and whales in the water this spring and for many years to come."

"Ropeless" fishing gear (also known as "pop-up" or "on-demand" gear) keeps fishing lines and buoys with traps on the seafloor until fishermen return to retrieve them. This removes vertical fishing lines spanning hundreds of feet in the water for days on end. This essentially eliminates the threat of entanglement to whales and sea turtles that visit California's shores each year to feast on the abundant krill and forage fish found offshore.

The new gear will allow for crab fishing during spring months when whales and sea turtles are present and California's coast is closed to conventional crab fishing to prevent entanglements. Fishermen will be allowed to attach up to 10 traps on a ground line connected to each unit of ropeless gear, improving the efficiency and economic viability of the new method.

Today's funding for ropeless gear was part of a \$1,825,000 package that also included funding to support whale disentanglement response efforts, develop a system for tracking and enforcement of ropeless gear, and to purchase new uniquely marked fishing gear so that California Dungeness crab fishing gear can be distinguished from other trap fisheries.

*For more information on ropeless gear please see Oceana's report [Pathway to Pop-up Fishing Gear](#).*

*For more information on Oceana's campaign to prevent whale entanglements please visit  
[www.oceana.org/whalesafeoceans](http://www.oceana.org/whalesafeoceans).*