

Update: Dungeness crab season closure has 'cut off a key economic lifeline to small coastal fishing communities'

January 5, 2023



New Details posted Thursday, Jan. 5

We reached out to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife for a response to the crab fishers letter. We have received the following from Meghan C Dugan, ODFW West Region & Marine Resources Communications.

"We will take it into consideration in season opening in the coming days, along with input from the entire fleet (424 permittees, 6 major ports). We've had a challenging situation with low meat fill in some areas, high biotoxins in some areas, and so testing has extended past the first possible season start (Dec. 1).

As a reminder, ODFW follows state regulations and the regional Tri-State Protocol, gathering input from the commercial Dungeness crab industry fleet and the Oregon Dungeness Crab Commission for deciding the

crab season opening date(s).

Decisions are based on a complex set of factors including meat fill testing to ensure quality product for consumers, biotoxins testing to protect public health (testing conducted by the Oregon Department of Agriculture), and logistics for the fleet.

Check our Commercial Dungeness crab fishery webpage for more information. Commercial Dungeness crab is one of Oregon's highest value fisheries, contributing greatly to Oregon's economy, the coastal economy in particular. We value input from all commercial crab permit holders and fishery participants."

Previous coverage

As previously reported, the ocean commercial Dungeness crab season remains closed until at least Jan. 15, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW).

As Oregon Dungeness crab fishers wait for the opening of the new season, stalled by state and federal health and safety regulations, the following has been released by members of the Oregon Dungeness crab fishers.

The release:

A group of Oregon Dungeness crab fishers comprising nearly 10% of the state's permitted commercial fleet sent an open letter this morning to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife strongly criticizing the Department's failure to open the Dungeness crab season along approximately half of Oregon's coast in areas where crab have exceeded meat quality thresholds for several weeks.

As the delayed opening enters its second month, the fishers' letter describes in detail how the Department's refusal to open the season has cut off a key economic lifeline to small fishing communities up and down the Oregon coast. The letter also takes sharp aim at the Oregon Dungeness Crab Advisory Committee, which the fishers describe as an "echo chamber" made up of special interests including major processors that benefit from lower prices that predominate after the end of the peak-demand holiday season, at the expense of mom-and-pop businesses and Oregon consumers.

The strong language in the fleet's letter calls ODFW to account for failing to consider the life-safety risks associated with the late start, stating that "[a]s fishers, we understand and accept the calculated risks that are inherent in our profession. The overwhelming majority of us are highly proactive in doing everything in our power to minimize those risks and ensure that we and our crews return home safely to our families. We cannot express strongly enough how disturbed we are that the Department appears unaware and unconcerned that its decision-making this season has directly undercut our efforts."

The letter goes on to insist that ODFW open the season no later than January 15, arguing that failing to do so would amount to an "extraordinarily irresponsible" move that "would leave a devastating and likely permanent mark on the composition and integrity of Oregon's Dungeness crab fishery and its fleet."

Perry Bordeaux, who fishes out of Newport and helped organize the effort in the week following the December 22 Advisory Committee meeting that preceded the most recent postponement, said that support for

the fishers' position runs even deeper than the large number of fleet members who signed onto the letter on short notice suggests. "I know from my outreach that there are many, many more members of Oregon's fishing fleet who support our position but are not yet comfortable speaking out publicly at this juncture," Bordeaux said. "I expect that as momentum builds in favor of clearer rules regarding the season opener, more and more small to mid-sized crabbers will step up and join our push for more equitable, transparent, and principled decision making at the state level," Bordeaux continued. "The bottom line is that the delays this season have been a disaster for most stakeholders, from consumers, to marine wildlife, to mom-and-pop fishing businesses and the family-wage jobs we support in our coastal communities. The Department needs to understand and appreciate the harm this unnecessary delay has created so that it can avoid repeating these costly mistakes in the future,"

Garibaldi fisherman and fellow letter signer Levi Cherry agreed. "For me, fresh local Dungeness crab is a holiday staple that Oregonians have enjoyed for generations," said Cherry. "As a fisherman, I take enormous pride in helping make that tradition possible, and it just crushes me that it didn't happen this year even though the crab were ready to go across a huge part of the state," Cherry continued. "The ball was in ODFW's court, and they dropped it," Cherry went on, "it's just a shame, because I feel our regulators are really misinformed about the interests and concerns of the stakeholder community, which is a lot more diverse than just the voices on the Oregon ODCAC," Cherry said, referring to the Advisory Committee. "I hope our open letter is a first step in a larger dialogue that can give voice to these issues and improve the management of our fishery going forward," Cherry concluded.

The Oregon Dungeness Crab Advisory Committee is expected to meet again this week, to discuss whether to open the season on January 15 or continue the delay. The decision that follows will no doubt have major ramifications for Oregon fishers and the communities they help support across the state.

Attached is a copy of the signed open letter addressed to Caren Braby, Marine Resources Program Manager at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

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