

Commercial Crab Fishing Violations on the Rise

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Wildlife officers from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife Marine Enforcement Division have noticed an uptick in the number of commercial Dungeness crab cases in North Coast waters since December 2021.

Since December 9, 2021, there have been five cases out of Crescent City and two out of Eureka regarding possession of undersize crabs by commercial crab fishermen. The most common violation during this period has been commercial harvest of undersized crabs. Commercial Dungeness crab fishermen are expected to measure their entire catch and keep only crabs that are equal to or greater than 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches, which is slightly more than the required 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ width required of recreational crabbers. There is a provision in the law to authorize possession of no more than one percent of the catch to be undersize.

In all seven cases, citations were written, the loads were seized and the proceeds from the sales of the crab were directed to the Wildlife Preservation Fund until the cases can be adjudicated in court. Collectively in the seven cases, there were 575 undersized crab discovered during inspections in the past few months. The illegal loads seized have ranged from 8 to 24 percent undersized, making them gross violations of the one

percent undersized Dungeness crab allowance. During the investigations, wildlife officers discovered evidence that some boat crews had attempted to avoid wildlife officers at the dock and had possibly dumped a load of short crabs. One of the cited violators had been recently warned by wildlife officers for possession of short crabs.

A slightly different type of Dungeness crab violation also occurred in December 2021 involving an anonymous citizen tip that a Commercial Passenger Fishing Vessel would be using 120 recreational traps in addition to their commercial traps to fish for commercial Dungeness crab outside of San Francisco Bay. Their investigation revealed that the suspect fisherman was illegally using recreational traps prior to the commercial season opener to enhance his commercial landings. In total, 8,322 pounds of crab were seized.

“Wildlife officers hope word will spread through the commercial crab fishing industry that Dungeness crab violations will result in citations and possible permit suspensions or revocations,” said David Bess, CDFW Deputy Director and Chief of the Law Enforcement Division. “California’s commercial crab fishing industry has historically been a viable commercial fishery that contributes much to California dinner tables and the economy. The majority of commercial crab fishermen remain compliant. Our end goal is to simply reduce the violations of a few to zero.”

Both commercial and recreational crabbers are required to have a measuring device to ensure all Dungeness crab meet the minimum size limit of 6 ¼ inches for commercial harvest and 5 ¾ inches for recreational harvest, measured by the shortest distance through the body from edge of shell to edge of shell directly in front of and excluding the points (lateral spines).

While there has been an observed uptick in the number of commercial crab violations, CDFW commends the broader majority of the commercial Dungeness crab fleet for their compliance with the rules governing the fishery and their significant efforts to reduce the risk of whale and sea turtle entanglements.