

Dungeness crab season delayed again, until Dec. 30



Fisherman Mike Dvorak sells Dungeness crab off his boat at Pillar Point Harbor in Half Moon Bay. JANE TYSKA — STAFF ARCHIVES

BY LINDA ZAVORAL

LZAVORAL@BAYAREANEWSGROUP.COM

First there was no local crab for Californians for Thanksgiving. Now it's off the table for Christmas. And if you were thinking of New Year's, well, don't count on it.

California Fish and Wildlife officials have announced another postponement in the commercial Dungeness crab season — the third delay this season.

From the Sonoma-Mendocino County line south to the Mexican border, a risk assessment undertaken Wednesday determined there is still a high concentration of migrating whales

that could get tangled in fishing gear. It's the fourth consecutive year of delays to protect the humpbacks. On the far north coast, whales have moved south from Mendocino, Humboldt and Del Norte counties, but state officials said testing of crabs caught in these waters showed low meat quality, hence the continued ban there.

Commercial crabbing will be delayed until Dec. 30 and possibly later, news that could make crustacean lovers, well, crabby.

Already, Draeger's Eric Hurtado said, "Customers are asking me every day, 'Have you heard anything about the local crab?'"

He's a veteran of the Blackhawk/Danville store's meat and fish department and remembers well the delays of the last several years. For their seafood-loving customers, they'll stock live crab from Washington and Oregon state. But as for his own table, "I usually wait. I prefer buying local."

The continued postponement received a unanimous recommendation from the California Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group, which is comprised of commercial and recreational crab fishermen, scientists and conservation organizations.

"Elevated whale entanglement risk is becoming the new norm in the fall and spring months, so the crab fishing season with conventional vertical line gear is likely to get shorter and shorter," said scientist Geoff Shester of the Oceana conservationists, who is a member of the advisory group. Oceana is urging the state and crab fishermen to adopt safer gear that will both "support fishermen's livelihoods and protect the safety of whales and sea turtles," he said.

A similar scene is playing out on the East Coast, where lobsters have been put on the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch "red list" to protect the migration of North Atlantic right whales, which are currently migrating to their calving grounds off South Carolina, Georgia and northeastern Florida.

Traditionally, California's commercial season begins Nov. 15 and the recreational season earlier than that. This year, recreational crabbing has been allowed since Nov. 5, so long as crabbers use only hoop nets and crab snares. And since Nov. 28, recreational fishing with crab traps has been allowed off the far north coast but not elsewhere.

The next risk assessment is scheduled to take place on or before Dec. 22. Even if an opening date is set for the day after the ban lifts, which will be Dec. 31, it will take some time for crab fishermen and processors to agree on a price and for the crabbers to get their pots in the water.

The Oceana organization cites figures from NOAA Fisheries that estimate that roughly 75% of reported whale entanglements prove fatal because the heavy fishing gear can prevent the mammals from diving for food.

Since 2015, there have been delays in all but one commercial Dungeness season in the Bay Area. A toxin, domoic acid, that could sicken anyone who eats the tainted crab, destroyed Northern California's 2015-2016 commercial season and created delays in other years.

In 2018, the commercial season began without a hitch, although recreational crabbers had to postpone their fishing.

In 2019 and 2020, the fishing line danger to whales resulted in a crabbing delay of several weeks. The 2020 crabbing season was officially set to begin Dec. 23, but price negotiations between crab fleets and seafood processors delayed the start until early January 2021.

The 2021 season was delayed two weeks for far Northern California and got underway Dec. 1. In the Bay Area, the commercial crabbing season wasn't allowed to start until Dec. 29. The end came earlier than usual — April 8 of this year — after two whales became entangled in crab-fishing gear, one off the San Mateo County coast and one in Monterey Bay.

According to Oceana, the state recorded three whales caught in crabbing lines earlier this year.