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Dungeness crab fishing season delayed due to whale and sea turtle entanglement risk

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State Fish and Wildlife officials are delaying the start of the Dungeness crab fishing season due to a threat of whale and sea turtle entanglements.

Charlton Bonham, director of the Fish and Wildlife department, issued a decision to postpone the start date for California Dungeness crab fishermen south of the Mendocino/Sonoma County line for one week — from Nov. 15 to Nov. 22. The decision was based on data indicating the prevalence of whales in the area.

Bonham's decision to minimize entanglement risk follows a court-approved agreement with the Center for Biological Diversity, a Phoenix-based environmental nonprofit that in 2017 sued the wildlife agency, claiming it had fallen short in preventing Dungeness crab fishing gear from killing humpback, blue whales and leatherback sea turtles. Fish and Wildlife is responsible for granting the fishery its permits.

Bonham originally delayed the start of the season until Nov. 23, but moved it up one day after receiving input from the California Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group. The group, made up of commercial and recreational fishermen, environmentalists, members of the disentanglement network, and state and federal agencies explores ways to minimize whale entanglements in crab fishing gear.

Among other issues, the group looked into the socioeconomic impact on the fishing community. There are 550 California permit holders in the crab fishing fleet.

"The vast majority of volume comes in in the first few weeks," said Noah Oppenheim, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of the Fishermen's Association and Institute for Fisheries. "When there is a healthy market to support and move large amounts, the value of the fishery is increased. Having an extra week before Thanksgiving is a big deal. I don't think one week is catastrophic but it will cost the fleet millions of dollars."

Santa Monica Seafood, one of the largest suppliers of fresh seafood on the West Coast, sells at least 5,000 pounds of Dungeness crabs during the holidays.

"The demand is twice as much as at any other time of the year," said Eric Costelloe, director of retail operations for the seafood company. "We move with supply and demand. The availability of fresh crabs has decreased in the last year."

The working group discussions included the recent incident of a whale found entangled in California Dungeness crab gear in the Humboldt area. Officials for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration are reviewing the details but gear found on the whale means it was likely caught up last year or in gear left in the ocean.

"At this time of year, large whales begin to migrate to calving and mating grounds off of southern Mexico and Costa Rica," said Pieter Folkens, a permitted whale disentangler for NOAA. "A considerable number of whales still remain in our area, taking advantage of available prey. The delay provides those lingering whales extra time to vacate the area, thus reducing the risk of entanglements when the Dungeness crab season begins."

Kristen Monsell, legal director of the Center for Biological Diversity's ocean programs, said her organization is happy to see an assessment of whale entanglement risk factored into the timing of the start of the crab fishing season.

"But we're still worried about this crab season because California hasn't made other key reforms," she said. "Crab gear is still killing humpback whales. With crabbers about to drop thousands of lines into the Pacific, state officials should be doing a lot more to safeguard endangered marine animals."

So far this year, reported entanglements involving fishing gear along the West Coast have dropped compared to a year prior. As of mid-August, the National Marine Fisheries Service reported 17 confirmed whale entanglements compared to 40 for the same period in 2018.

Since then, four more entanglements have been confirmed by NOAA.

"We are waiting to see where we end up at the end of December as gear is going back out into the water soon and that's when we have increased levels of concern," said Justin Viezbicke, marine mammal stranding coordinator for NOAA on the West Coast. "Overall it does look like things have trended down in terms of total numbers but this is only one year and it is still at a level that is unacceptable in terms of take under the Endangered Species Act."