

“We have recorded a total of 2,878,131 pounds of Dungeness crab,” reported WDFW Coastal Shellfish Manager Dan Ayres in late January.

“In the same time frame last season we had landings of 6,266,621 pounds.”

Calls for change in fishery management policy

Concerns about poor salmon returns and the impact of ocean acidification has prompted calls for change in fishery management from local processors.

“We need our fish opportunities back,” said Antich. “It’s dangerous to be heavily reliant on one fishery and any businesses reliant on salmon are dwindling away.”

In January 2018 South Bend Products acquired a processing facility in Chinook, formerly owned by Bell Buoy Crab. The facility provided more access to the Dungeness crab fishery and curbed shipping costs. The facility processes crab year around.

Employees vary at each location in Chinook and South Bend, depending on the season and the availability of fish. During peak production at the Chinook facility, up to 150 employees may be processing Dungeness crab, but right now it’s about 50.

At the facility in South Bend, the crew can swell up to 100 employees, varying with the success of commercial fishing seasons. Summer is the busiest time with salmon, Antich said.

The impact of ocean acidification on young crabs has been a focus of scientific research, but the lack of salmon — the backbone of the processing facility in South Bend — has been Antich’s biggest immediate concern.

“There was an article out last week talking about the ocean acidification affecting the juvenile crab,” Antich said. “I don’t know that we’re seeing the impact of that today, but if it’s true and we see reduced recruits and the biomass weakening. If we’re only reliant on crab we’re going to be in trouble. We need salmon. We need a well-rounded and diverse fishery because you never know when something is going to fail, like the chum salmon in 2019. The absolute lack of chum in Puget Sound — we typically buy millions of pounds out of there but this year we didn’t pack more than a truckload. It’s just that bad.”

Regulatory issues have an oversized impact on Columbia River and Willapa Bay fishermen, Antich said.

“Our Willapa watershed is so restricted with the fishing opportunities and amount of fish being raised, same with the Columbia River,” he said. “These opportunities are lost. With less opportunity there’s less



LUKE WHITTAKER

F/V *Cutting Edge* crew member Christopher Hinojosa offloads crab Sunday, Feb. 2. at Ilwaco Landing.



LUKE WHITTAKER

Dungeness crab are offloaded Sunday, Feb. 2. at Ilwaco Landing. The season has been rocky for fishermen who have endured rough seas and an uncertain market.

effort and interest in fishing. The tradition of passing it down in the family is gone. The young guys aren’t starting in any of the salmon fisheries.”

Ramping up hatchery production

Some feel re-focusing on hatcheries could remedy the current lack of salmon.

“We need to get the hatcheries open to produce more fish, so people can make a living at this again,” said South Bend Products Facility Manager Allan Heather. “Without the salmon and the sport industry, it kills all these communities along the coast. They depend on that money. And when they only get a few days to fish, they don’t hire people and a lot of them just close up.”

The fallout from less robust sport and commercial fisheries is evident in coastal

communities, Antich said.

“Look at what’s happened to Westport, the town has just died from a lack of tourists. The hotels and charter offices are no longer full.”

Antich and Heather agree that raising more hatchery fish could be part of the solution.

“They (fishery managers) want to make everything wild and natural, but without spawning at the hatcheries it’s not going to happen,” Heather said.

“There are no more natural fish. They’re gone. The only thing left is genetically modified fish from interbreeding.”

Brave new world for local processors

On Tuesday, Jan. 28, dozens of workers draped in plastic aprons, gloves and hairnets worked in unison picking and pack-

ing Dungeness crab at the Chinook facility. What appeared to a full staff, however, was only a fraction of the former crew.

On one side, workers picked meat from the claws and body of the crab, while others in a separate section filled and sealed 5-pound cans of crabmeat.

“We produce crab meat five days a week 52 weeks a year,” Antich said. “We buy as much crab as we can at the peak of the season when they’re in prime condition, during the first month or month and a half. We have the frozen sections in cold storage, thaw it and pick crab meat year-around.”

The product is then primarily distributed on the West Coast to bigger markets in Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Crab picking, or shaking, requires fast and steady hands, and pay often depends on how proficient each picker is.

“We can usually tell within a week if they’re going to make it,” Antich said. “It’s piece work. You’ve got to meet a certain amount of product to achieve a minimum-wage level. It’s priced per pound and if they’re not making minimum wage — if it’s costing us money — then they’re not qualified for the job. A good crab shaker can produce more than 160 pounds in a 7-hour shift. The top shakers can make \$30 per hour.”

Less available product has translated into fewer employees and smaller paychecks for local processors and their employees. In the past, processing facilities would hum 24-hours during peak fishing seasons and workers would come in waves and work in shifts. Today, a skeleton of the former crew still exists, a fraction of the former workforce. Now in prime Dungeness fishing season, there sometimes isn’t enough product to keep what workers remain busy for a full day.

“They would start at 6 a.m. and were done before 8 a.m. for days,” Antich said. “They weren’t even reaching the first coffee break. It’s a sad thing to see because we’ve grown accustomed to this business model. We’ve been able to manage the Chinook facility this year with less staff because of the inconsistencies with live crab. We’re not running 24-hours as would be a normal crab season. We’ve been managing it with one shift all season. It’s about 50 fewer employees.”

Rising costs, shrinking margins

The dependability of salmon and crab has dwindled as operating costs for local seafood processing facilities have risen.

“It’s labor and higher operating costs from the plant side to higher bait costs on the fishermen’s side,” Antich said. “It’s higher operating costs, no matter if you’re a fisherman or a processor.”