



LUKE WHITTAKER

Clear skies prevailed at the Port of Ilwaco on Sunday, Feb. 2, however bouts of bad weather through a majority of January has kept much of the fleet in port. "They've only had 11 or 12 fishable days this month," Shirley said.

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The Food Modernization Safety Act, signed into law in 2011, has been among the numerous changes for small seafood processors along the coast.

"Food regulation is continually updating," Antich said. "We are keen to that and we're trying to be proactive on those things."

In January, Washington raised the standard minimum wage from \$12 to \$13.50. The impact was felt directly by seafood processors that seek to hire low-wage employees during the winter season.

"It had an impact for sure," Antich said. "Most of the entry-level cannery positions were at \$13, but are now getting \$13.50. Staff that was making \$13.50 previously, that have years of experience and know what to do, are now worth more, so I gave them a raise."

The business currently employs more than 100 minimum-wage workers, approximately 55 in South Bend and 50 in Chinook, Antich said.

The staff numbers fluctuate with the fishing seasons. A poor salmon year in 2019 followed by a slow crab season so far this season has gutted the staff, particularly in Chinook, where 50 positions have been cut.

Still, many staff, such as Hector Medina, have remained loyal and returned for decades.



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F/V Cutting Edge captain Brian Cutting inspects his catch as it's offloaded Sunday, Feb. 2 at Ilwaco Landing. Cutting said the weather, tariffs and coronavirus have all been hurdles to commercial fishermen this season.

Medina, 45, has processed crab in Chinook for the past 23 years.

"Consistency," Medina said when asked what makes a good crab shaker.

Seafood processing jobs can be a savior

for families looking to earn money during the slower winter months, when fewer seasonal jobs are available.

"They're loyal to the cannery," Antich said. "There's really no jobs in north county."

Change is the only constant in evolving processing industry

Albacore tuna and Chinook salmon were once the backbone of local canning and processing industries lining the Columbia, but change has been a constant.

"In this industry, five years ago were the old days, 10 years ago were how things used to be," Antich said. "It was nothing to have 100,000 pounds of fish and running three trucks off the Columbia River or Willapa. In 2014, we hauled 30,000 pounds of coho out of Nahcotta on the first day of the fishery and it sustained. We bought millions of pounds of fish. This year we might have had 10,000 pounds once. We've run more fish in one day in the past than we've ran the whole year last year."

As certain fisheries have waxed and waned, local processors have adjusted accordingly.

"It's significantly different than it was five or 10 years ago," Antich said. "Salmon was the higher value 10 years ago, but now Dungeness is probably 60% and salmon is 20%." Black cod has risen to