

Oregon School Days

OSAA Approves Hybrid League System Aimed at Cutting Travel and Classroom Disruptions

Story by Milo Banks

After years of complaints from schools, parents, and administrators — particularly in central and southern Oregon — the Oregon School Activities Association has approved a new hybrid league system that will reshape high school athletics beginning in the 2026–



2030 classification cycle.

The plan, approved by the OSAA Executive Board, creates two new 6A–5A hybrid leagues designed to dramatically reduce travel time, limit missed class hours, and improve scheduling flexibility without dismantling existing classifications. The move reflects growing recognition that geography, not just enrollment size, has become one of the biggest challenges facing Oregon's schools.

At the center of the change are two newly created leagues. The 6A–5A Midwestern Hybrid League groups Eugene and Springfield-area schools, including Sheldon, South Eugene, Churchill, North Eugene, Springfield, Thurston, and Willamette. The 6A–5A Southwest Hybrid League brings together Grants Pass, North Medford, Roseburg, and South Medford with Ashland, Crater, and Eagle Point.

While the leagues mix Class 6A and Class 5A schools, classifications themselves remain intact. Schools will still compete for playoffs and championships within their assigned class. The hybrid structure applies only to regular-season scheduling, allowing schools to play geographically sensible opponents regardless of class size.

OSAA officials say the goal is straightforward: reduce long, costly road trips that pull students out of class for entire days. In recent years, some schools — particularly those in Lane, Douglas, and Jackson counties — have faced league schedules that required three- to five-hour bus rides for routine league games. That reality strained school budgets, disrupted instruction, and placed additional burdens on student-athletes.

Under the new system, schools must continue to schedule required games within their own classification but are encouraged, though not required, to play cross-classification games within their hybrid league. That flexibility gives athletic directors more control to build schedules that balance competition, academics, and logistics.

For schools like Thurston, the impact could be immediate. Instead of regular trips north or south for league contests, many games will now be minutes away. Administrators say that change

keeps students in class longer, reduces fatigue, and improves overall attendance. Fewer missed days also mean less time teachers spend helping athletes catch up on coursework.

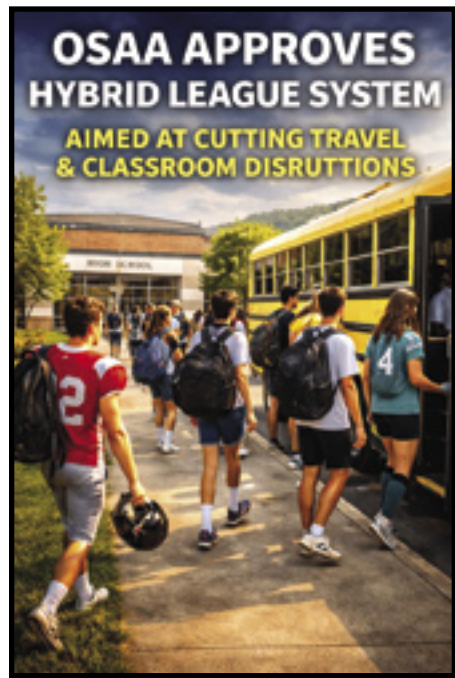
The plan also addresses competitive balance concerns. While some worried that 5A schools could be overwhelmed by larger 6A programs, OSAA emphasized that hybrid leagues are not about forcing mismatched competition. Scheduling decisions remain local, and schools can choose how often they cross classifications. In some cases, junior varsity teams from larger schools may play varsity teams from smaller schools, providing meaningful competition without unfair match ups.

Support for the change grew out of years of feedback from rural and mid-sized districts. Administrators argued that a strictly enrollment-based league system no longer made sense in a geographically large state with uneven population distribution. OSAA officials acknowledged that point, noting that travel time had become one of the most consistent complaints during public comment periods.

The hybrid leagues are part of a broader four-year realignment cycle running from 2026 through 2030. OSAA leaders describe the approach as adaptive rather than experimental — a recognition that traditional league structures must evolve to meet modern realities.

Not everyone sees the plan as perfect. Some schools remain cautious about how scheduling flexibility will play out in practice, while others worry about maintaining rivalries or ensuring consistent competition. OSAA officials say those concerns will be monitored and adjustments considered in future cycles.

For now, the hybrid league system represents a practical compromise: preserving classifications while acknowledging geography. For student-athletes, parents, and teachers, the change promises fewer hours on buses, more time in classrooms, and a schedule that better fits the realities of life in Oregon's schools.



Crab Season Opens

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winter when other fisheries are limited or closed.

The December opening allowed boats that had sat idle through early winter to resume work. Processors restarted shifts, ice plants powered up, fuel docks saw renewed traffic, and trucking routes resumed moving product inland. Restaurants and seafood markets, which often plan winter menus around fresh Oregon crab, were able to restock after weeks of uncertainty.

But the season did not open evenly along the coast. Areas north of Cape Falcon remained closed or delayed as testing continued, leaving a patchwork fishery where some boats were working while others waited. For fishermen based in northern ports, the delay meant continued dock time, no landings, and postponed paychecks. For crews paid on shares, every lost week compounds the financial strain.

This uneven start has become familiar in recent years. Oregon, along with California and Washington, coordinates crab season management closely, balancing food safety, conservation, and market stability. Delays are most often tied to domoic acid levels, a naturally occurring marine toxin that can accumulate in shellfish during harmful algal blooms. Even when toxin levels are safe, low meat yield can also delay openings, as regulators seek to protect both consumers and the long-term viability of the fishery.

Testing protocols are rigorous, and for good reason. However, for fishermen operating on narrow margins, the process can feel unforgiving. Winter expenses do not pause while test results are pending. Boat loans, moorage fees, insurance, crew advances, and household bills continue regardless of whether crab is moving across the dock.

Processors face similar pressure. Staffing, shipping contracts, and cold storage all hinge on season timing. A delayed opening can disrupt supply chains that stretch well beyond the coast, affecting wholesalers, retailers, and restaurants throughout Oregon and neighboring states.

Despite those challenges, early landings in open areas have provided cautious optimism. Dockside reports from Coos Bay and Winchester Bay indicated solid crab quality, helping stabilize prices as volume increased. While early-season prices are often volatile, consistent landings tend to bring some predictability back into the market, benefiting both fishermen and buyers.

The economic impact of crab season is felt quickly in coastal towns. When boats are fishing, fuel docks are busy around the clock. Ice plants hum. Marine supply stores see increased traffic for repairs and gear. Cafés open earlier, grocery stores see fuller carts, and local service businesses experience a noticeable lift. It is a familiar winter rhythm, and its absence is immediately noticeable when the fleet is tied up.

At the same time, uncertainty remains the defining theme. Climate-driven changes in ocean conditions have made crab seasons less predictable. Harmful algal blooms have become more frequent and persistent, increasing the likelihood of delayed openings. Fishermen and regulators alike acknowledge that what was once considered an occasional disruption is now a recurring risk.

State fishery managers continue

to emphasize monitoring and coordination. Testing along remaining closed areas is ongoing, and officials note that openings can occur quickly once standards are met. However, no firm timelines are provided, leaving fishermen and coastal businesses planning week to week.

Beyond the docks, the stakes are significant. Crab revenues support entire local economies, particularly in smaller ports where winter alternatives are limited. Boat yards, trucking companies, equipment suppliers, and seasonal workers



all depend on the flow of crab money. When the season stalls, the ripple effects can last well beyond winter.

Housing stability is also tied to fishery income in many coastal communities. For some families, crab season earnings cover mortgages, rent, and deferred expenses from slower months. Delays can push already tight budgets into crisis territory, increasing reliance on short-term loans or assistance programs.

Local governments feel the impact as well. Reduced economic activity translates to lower sales tax receipts and less discretionary spending, affecting everything from public services to community events. In towns where fishing remains a primary industry, the health of the crab season is closely linked to overall community stability.

As Oregon moves into January, attention remains fixed on how the remainder of the season unfolds. Continued openings would help restore confidence and allow fishermen and businesses to make longer-term plans. Another prolonged delay, particularly in northern ports, would deepen existing strains.

For now, the cautious return of the crab fleet serves as both reassurance and reminder. The work has resumed, but the ground beneath it is less certain than it once was. Oregon's coastal economy remains resilient, built on generations of knowledge and hard-earned adaptability. Yet each season brings a clearer signal that the future of the fishery will require not only skill and endurance, but flexibility in the face of changing ocean conditions.

Even with uncertainty lingering, the opening of crab season remains one of the most important economic markers of winter on the Oregon coast. For those who make their living on the water, it is not just a job returning to motion, but a community holding its breath, hoping the season holds.