

OPINION

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OUR VIEW

Crabbers deserve support, encouragement

Look back at several years of news about the Columbia River Dungeness crab industry highlights trends and problems that need a better-coordinated response.

The past several crab seasons can't be described as all bad. For example, as recently as 2014-15, ex-vessel prices reached \$4.50 a pound to fishermen in December, spiking to \$9 just before Asian new year celebrations. Levels of the marine toxin domoic acid, which have occasionally been elevated, have not appeared to shake consumer confidence in crab. They remain a coveted culinary treat on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. Crabbers in Washington and Oregon totaled \$52.4 million in sales last year; crab remain a bright spot for the commercial fishing industry.

Poke into this rosy picture a little, however, and serious concerns emerge.

This season is the second in a row in which independent crab boat owners and operators have attempted, unsuccessfully, to exercise cooperative leverage to win better prices from processors. In both years, weeks of unrelated delays beyond the traditional Dec. 1 start left most crabbers in a weakened position. Plenty of family budgets are built around the assumption that some of the year's biggest payday will start refilling bank accounts from December through about February.

There are pragmatic limits to how much financial pain crabbing families can bear. This year, crabbers in Newport earned a black eye among their peers for buckling at \$2.75 a pound at the start of this week and taking to sea. But a great many crabbers elsewhere on the coast were also at their breaking point. Early



Luke Whittaker/Chinook Observer

Skipper Florian Mumford, above, and deckhand Andrew Glenn waited for weather and bar conditions before heading out earlier this week from the Port of Ilwaco. 'We're playing it safe,' Mumford said. 'The weather has been kind of marginal.'

indications are that even \$2.75 isn't a sure-thing price this week.

Continuing consolidation on the processing side puts a lot of power in few hands. Capitalism works best when there is near-parity in bargaining strength among all the players in a product supply chain. There clearly is an imbalance now when it comes to crab. Antitrust allegations notwithstanding, the overall trend in West Coast seafood has for years been heading toward fewer and larger firms. This was true even in the 19th century, when overcapacity led to bankruptcy for many salmon canners and the merger of others into the Columbia River Packers Association, which became Bumble Bee.

To the extent enough Americans care to buck this sort of trend, legal action is a possibility, as it was in President Theodore Roosevelt's time. A private economic response also is possible —

for example, by forming fishermen's cooperative associations and by consumers supporting surviving community-based processing operations.

Environmental factors — warming water, changing ocean chemistry, invasive species and harmful algal blooms that generate marine toxins — all make crab seasons less certain than they once were. This season, weeks of delay resulted from too many male crabs developing meat too slowly. More scientific research and monitoring are warranted, and deserve both private and public funding. We need to better understand what is happening, in order to develop ways to mitigate the damage. More regulatory flexibility may be part of the answer, in the sense that season timing and geographical placement could benefit from faster adjustments.

The aging of the fleet — problems with generational transfers of

equipment, permits and expertise — demands smart and immediate response. Legislative fixes will be required in some cases, along with more creative financing options, to facilitate bank financing of transfers.

Crabbers resent and distrust outside efforts to intervene in how the fishery is conducted. Deference is warranted in such a specialized field. However, it must be wondered whether there are ways to improve crabbing's cost/benefit ratio. It is inherently hazardous to make a mad dash out into the wild Pacific over one of the world's most notorious river bars in the middle of storm season. Safety remains a key consideration in this highly dangerous fishery. We want our crabbers to come home to their families. Regulators and the industry must continue seeking ways to minimize risks and maximize local economic benefits.

The West Coast's Tristate management regime still needs work to ensure fair shares of the resource between different sizes of vessels and different zones of the coast. Here in the prime crabbing grounds at the mouth of the Columbia, we have a legitimate interest in ensuring that locally based boats get a fair crack at local crab. Tribal fishing areas, marine preserves and possible changes associated with marine spatial planning all force Columbia crabbers into a relatively small area. Management decisions must not be permitted to make life even more difficult than it is already is.

This list could go on. For now, suffice it to say that the smart, courageous, hardworking crabbers working out of Clatsop and Pacific county ports deserve support and encouragement from all of us.

GUEST COLUMN

Next monster earthquake is long overdue

Today marks the 318th anniversary of the most recent monster earthquake on the Cascadia Subduction Zone. In the past 6,000 years or so, these quakes of magnitude 8 or 9 have occurred every 202 years, on average. Only once in that period of time has the interval between quakes exceeded 250 years, so the pressure in the fault has been growing for a very long time.

In a way, we've been lucky to have avoided this devastating quake and its accompanying tsunami for so long. We've had the opportunity to strengthen our lifelines — roads, bridges, electrical grids, water and wastewater systems, fuel storage depots — against the damage the quake can cause.

But in another way, we've been unlucky. We didn't realize until about 30 years ago that the subduction zone

was even an active fault, let alone one capable of producing the worst natural disaster to hit North America in modern times. As a result, our building standards were not strong enough to withstand it.

That means we expect that roads will be blocked by thousands of bridge failures and landslides. Many critical public buildings, businesses, houses, and the other lifeline systems will likely fail. Especially vulnerable are the hundreds of unreinforced masonry buildings that contain both businesses and multifamily apartments.

We can hope it's not too late to avoid the worst of this impending catastrophe. But survival as a society and prosperous economy will require rapid expansion of effort from residents, businesses and government agencies. That's why we formed Cascadia Prepared as a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization about a year ago as a private-sector force to encourage and assist effective resilience-building efforts from all corners throughout our region — from British

Columbia all the way to Northern California. We're working with the Seattle-Based Cascadia Region Earthquake Workgroup, the Oregon Emergency Management Association, and many others to develop resilience programs and increase public awareness of this existential threat.

Please don't assume that first responders have the situation under control. In 2016, the "Cascadia Rising" exercise, designed to simulate and test regional response to a 9.0 earthquake, showed that the federal, state and local agencies we trust to handle emergencies will be overwhelmed by the huge number of people who are injured or stranded by the subduction zone event.

What can you do? It's critically important that all organizations and private homes have survival plans that include enough emergency food and water to keep everyone on site alive for 14 days. We should all have "go bags" in our vehicles and homes containing other

emergency gear. Cascadia Prepared's website (bit.ly/cascadiagobag) will give you many ideas about how to get ready, including what kinds of items to put into your go bags.

We should also all live and work in buildings that won't fall down when the quake hits. If your building was constructed before 2000 and you're not positive it is seismically sound, it may be worth having an inspection to determine whether retrofitting is needed to ensure your very survival.

We can do this! The steps we need to take individually and collectively are well-documented and easy to understand. It will just take a bit of planning, a modest investment of time and money, and a willingness to prepare for uncertain threats. Join friends and neighbors in asking a bit more of ourselves, our employers, and our public agencies as we get ready to preserve our way of life.

Steve Robinson is president of Cascadia Prepared, an organization helping our region get ready for the next big earthquake. He can be reached at steve@cprep.org.



STEVE ROBINSON

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AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus

Portland Fire Department training recruits use a forklift in 2016 to hoist dummies to the top of a six-story tower for a simulated rescue for Cascadia Rising, a multiday and multi-agency tsunami and earthquake drill in Oregon and Washington state.



AP Photo/Ted S. Warren

The Washington Army National Guard demonstrates a decontamination station for people and vehicles during the 2016 Cascadia Rising exercise.