

# Rule changes: Recommendations will go to commission in April

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behind. They want to keep areas open when possible by modifying how crabs are processed and sold even when domoic acid levels are high.

“Our ultimate goal for Oregon is that if there’s a public safety issue, we deal with that first,” Braby said. “But the economic viability of the fishery and the economic support of coastal communities that harvest that crab is right up there as our second goal. Being able to do that as much as we possibly can, given we’ve taken care of our first goal, is to everybody’s benefit.”

Domoic acid can accumulate in a crab’s guts, but remove the guts and the crab meat is still good. Commercial crab caught from Cape Blanco to the Oregon-California border has been under an evisceration order since mid-February. Whole or live crab are not on the menu there for now.

The West Coast as a whole has struggled with how to maintain valuable commercial fisheries in the face of massive blooms of marine toxins like domoic acid. That particular toxin can cause serious illness if consumed. Underweight crabs, stalled price negotiations and bad weather pushed back the start of this crab season, but elevated levels of domoic acid delayed the start of Oregon’s last two Dungeness seasons.

“Harmful algal blooms are happening more frequently and the biotoxins from those blooms are kind of percolating through crab, through razor clams, through other species in ways that aren’t always predictable,” Braby said.

Fishery managers have needed more flexibility in addressing such issues, she added.

The recommendations that will go to the commission in April were developed by an advisory group whose members included state biologists and fishery managers, as well as people involved in the fishing industry.



Nate Kelly and Troy Constantine work to prepare the Swell Rider for the crab season.

Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

### Landings

Crabbers landed just under 16.5 million pounds of crab in Oregon as of mid-February — about what fishermen landed in the opening weeks of the prior season, according to the state.

Washington state fishermen are behind on landings compared to last season, said Dan Ayres, coastal shellfish manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Landings for the state’s nontribal coastal

crab fishery stood at 5.5 million pounds four weeks into the season — only about 60 percent of the total catch during the previous season’s first weeks.

“It was a late start, then we had bad weather and crab quality issues, then we had price issues — it’s been a long winter,” Dean Antich, vice president

of South Bend Products, told the Chinook Observer.

Oregon and Washington’s commercial Dungeness fisheries traditionally open in December and the bulk of the crab is often caught in the first eight weeks of the season. Last season, Oregon fishermen saw a record ex-vessel value of \$62.7 million and total landings of 20.4 million pounds, well above the 10-year average of 16 million pounds.

The prices fishermen receive for their catch have dropped since the late January opener. Fishermen and processors had agreed to around \$2.75 per pound. Fishermen are now receiving around \$2.50 per pound.

The toxin levels down south are the remnants of a bloom that happened in 2017. For now, there are no toxin issues farther north affecting crab. In the coming months, the state will begin looking at water samples and occurrences of the algae that produce the blooms that result in biotoxins like domoic acid. Those results will “start to tell us about what will happen in 2018,” Braby said.

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