

STEP reports steelhead returning to Siuslaw trap

Winter Steelhead are returning to the Siuslaw basin in large numbers. This past Monday, 128 adult steelhead returned to the ODFW trap on Whittaker Creek.

The creek is a small stream that flows into the upper Siuslaw. The trap is located at the Whittaker Creek Campground, which is owned and operated by BLM.

The trap is constructed, maintained and checked by The Florence Salmon Trout Enhancement Program (STEP) under the direction of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Volunteers from the Florence STEP group checks the traps on Mondays, Thursdays and some Saturdays.

When the traps are worked, the steelhead are each checked see if they are ready to spawn. The fish that are ready to



COURTESY PHOTO

A STEP volunteer holds up a steelhead from the Whittaker Creek trap last Monday.

spawn are live spawned and released down stream to go back to the ocean.

Fish that are not ready to spawn are marked and put downstream to become part of the fishery.

Visits from third grade class from Siuslaw Elementary School and members of the middle school stream team have been scheduled to the Whittaker Creek trap. When the students are at the trap, the Florence STEP Group, members of the U.S. Forest Service, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and others lead learning stations dealing with the life cycle of salmon and steelhead.

Florence STEP, The Oregon Watershed Enhancement board, Florence Kiwanis Club, PTA and the Florence Rotary Club have provided funding for the educational field trips.

Commercial crabbing season underway after seven-week delay

NEWPORT — Oregon's most valuable commercial fishery for the state's official crustacean, Dungeness crab, got underway north of Cape Blanco yesterday.

This year's opening was delayed from its target start date of Dec. 1 because testing of crabs on some parts of the Pacific coast showed crab were low in meat yield.

In partnership with the Oregon Dungeness Crab Commission and the commercial crab industry, ODFW collects and quality tests crabs out of the six major crabbing ports before the season begins.

The season can be delayed if the meat yield doesn't meet a certain standard, which means that consumers get a high quality product with plenty of meat. (The goal is 23 or 25 percent meat recovery depending on the area, or 9-10 oz. of crab meat for a crab weighing 2.5 pounds.)

Failure to achieve a negotiated opening price and intense coastal storms also delayed the opening a few days after Jan. 15.

Dungeness crab have been

harvested commercially along the Pacific Coast since the late 1800s.

Current regulations allow only male crabs larger than 6 1/4 inches across the back of the shell to be taken. This protects the female and undersized male crabs which constitute the breeding population and produce the next generation of crab to be harvested in about four years, ensuring the sustainability of the overall stock and the industry.

This regulatory approach is working. Preliminary results from a NOAA study show that the population of legal-size males appears to be stable to increasing on the West Coast.

Harvest rates are also stable to increasing. Last season's ex-vessel value (or average price) set a record of \$62.7 million, with landings totaling 20 million pounds, 22 percent above the 10-year average.

Vessels returning to Newport had the most pounds of crab landed last year, followed by Astoria and Coos Bay. A little over 300 fishing boats bring crab into Oregon each season.

The industry is an important

economic driver in Oregon's coastal towns.

Commercial crabbing starts in the winter, when crabs are hard-shelled and full of meat. State natural resource agencies in Oregon, Washington and California cooperate as part of what's known as the Tri-State Agreement.

They jointly set a season opening date for the area from Point Arena, Calif. to Grays Harbor, Wash., or divide it into two areas with different opening dates. This helps to ensure that the fishery is fair and cer-

tain areas aren't over-targeted while others are closed.

While domoic acid did not play a role in this year's delayed opening for the northern area, the fishery south of Cape Blanco remains closed because at least some crabs are still above the domoic acid action level. Toxins present an ongoing concern for the state and the industry, and Oregon has a monitoring and response system in place for shellfish to protect public health and manage the risk of contamination.

Oregon Department of

Agriculture oversees the collection and testing of shellfish samples. Crabs are sampled every two to four weeks when toxins are above a certain level in razor clams or another indicator species.

If a single crab tests above the action level (20 parts per million for meat, 30 for viscera), that harvest area is closed and any crabs taken recently by the commercial industry are not sold to consumers. (When viscera is above 30 ppm but meat is below 20 ppm, managers can sometimes order that crab be

eviscerated rather than doing a full closure.)

It takes two clean tests, taken at least seven days apart, for ODA and ODFW to reopen the harvest area.

Since the first ever in-season commercial closure of a harvest area last year (when a single crab's viscera tested too high for domoic acid), ODFW, ODA and the industry have adopted new rules to improve traceability in the market chain, resulting in better preparation and response to future domoic acid events.

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