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Monterey crab fishermen brace for delay in Dungeness season



Crab pots sit idle at the Moss Landing Harbor on Wednesday. High levels of a naturally occurring toxin were found recently in crab caught along the California coastline. The fishing season could be delayed because of the finding. (Vern Fisher - Monterey Herald)

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Recreational Dungeness crab season postponed by state authorities

By Amy McDermott, newsroom@montereyherald.com, [@AmyGMcDermott](https://twitter.com/AmyGMcDermott) on Twitter

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MOSS LANDING >> Crab fishermen are braced for a hard season thanks to domoic acid, a toxin building up in Dungeness and rock crabs from Oregon to Santa Barbara.

Recreational crab season is expected to start Saturday, followed by commercial crab season on Nov. 15, but if toxin levels don't subside, both could be delayed. The Fish and Game Commission and the Department of Fish and Wildlife will vote on emergency closures Thursday. (Update: [The recreational Dungeness crab season was postponed by state authorities on Thursday morning.](#))

Pushing the season could be a big economic blow for fishermen, especially if delays cut into the Thanksgiving harvest.

"The biggest markets are always on holidays," said commercial fisherman Tom Hart. He sold 36,000 pounds of Dungeness to Phil's Fish Market in Moss Landing between season opening and Thanksgiving last year. Losing those few precious weeks "is like losing Black Friday for a retailer," Hart said. Fishermen haul in 80 percent to 90 percent of the season's catch between late November and late December.

Last year, California crab fishermen caught 16.8 million pounds of Dungeness, worth \$58.3 million. It was a "strong" season, according to the 2014 Dungeness Crab Report, by the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission. This year, the commercial season will end June 30.

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Like Hart, Daniel Deyerle also worries about missing the holidays. He's hauled in Dungeness for 15 years, off and on. "Hopefully we don't miss Thanksgiving, but if we do, we still have Christmas and New Year's," he said. Long delays are especially bleak because many offshore fisheries have taken added precautions to protect their stocks.

"Options for fishermen are very limited if one fishery has a problem," said Monterey Harbormaster Stephen Scheiblauber — fishermen can't replace lost revenue with other species.

At Phil's Fish Market, manager Francisco Santoyo plans to source Dungeness from Canada if local fisheries are closed. He sells 30,000 to 50,000 pounds of crab per season, and would rather buy from Moss Landing fishermen. It's much more expensive to order Dungeness from up north, and they're lower quality, he says.

Santoyo wouldn't dream of switching to another type of crab. "People want Dungeness," he said. "That's the best crab there is."

Hart admits a delay is possible, but isn't completely convinced. "It could all change between now and the 15th," he said. Deyerle disagrees. He thinks season delays are "a done deal."

If the season is delayed, both Deyerle and Hart hope closures are coordinated coastwide. If some fisheries open earlier than others, they worry that big operations from closed areas will swoop into open grounds, leaving local fishermen a smaller catch. Scheiblauber has heard the same concern in Monterey. An influx of northern fishermen "would wreak havoc on crab pricing," he added.

The fishermen wonder if delays are necessary. Consumers can't tell how toxic a crab is just by looking at it, but the toxin tends to build up in crab viscera rather than legs and body meat.

This year, toxin levels have varied in crabs throughout the state, from nondetectable to 190 parts per million. They have exceeded the safety thresholds of 30 parts per million for viscera, and 20 parts per million for meat, said the California Department of Public Health.

"While it's not in our interest to shut down any fishery, the bottom line here is the risk to public health," said Jordan Traverso of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Cooling water temperatures could bring good news for fishermen. Domoic acid builds up in crabs as they filter toxin-containing *Pseudo-nitzschia* algae from the water. Colder fall temperatures could help disperse the algae so the crabs are eating less of it.

"I hear the algal bloom is clearing out," said Deyerle. "Hopefully in two weeks the filter feeders will be fine."

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