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ESCAPE PORT REQUIREMENTS ON COMMERCIAL CRAB POTS  
Department of Fish and Wildlife  
Fish Division  
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Problem

Oregon crab fishermen are concerned that 4-3/8" escape ports in crab pots allow too many legal male crabs to escape. Requests have been made to determine whether or not this is so and to consider going back to 4-1/4" escape ports.

Background

Escape ports in crab pots greatly reduce the amount of handling and sorting of sublegal and female crabs. Prior to 1975, 4-1/4" escape ports were required. However, a cooperative study between the federal government and the states of Washington, Oregon, and California recommended that optimum size of escape ports was 4-3/8", based on the length-width ratio of legal male crabs of 6-1/4" in size. Oregon adopted a regulation that required all crab pots constructed after January 1, 1975, to have 4-3/8" escape ports. Further, beginning with the 1979-80 season, 4-3/8" escape ports would be required in all pots fished in Oregon waters. Washington also adopted a regulation requiring 4-3/8" escape ports starting with the 1979-80 season. California remained with the 4-1/4" port size. On February 15, 1978, we were informed by Washington that they had changed their position and that 4-1/4" escape ports would be required beginning with the 1979-80 season.

Discussion

Testing has been done in California, Oregon, and Washington to determine the average number of legal male crabs caught in pots using 4-1/4" and 4-3/8" escape ports under routine fishing conditions. Results showed:

- (1) About the same average number of legal male crabs were caught in pots using both sizes of escape ports.
- (2) Fewer sublegal and female crabs were caught in the pots using 4-3/8" escape ports.
- (3) The Washington data indicated that an average of 17% of the legal male crabs could potentially escape through a 4-3/8" port because the median size of crabs 6-1/4" in width caught off the northern Washington coast is slightly less than for crabs caught off the southern Washington coast.
- (4) Although more female and sublegal crabs will be caught and handled using 4-1/4" escape ports, about 75% of them will still escape.

The PFMC crab plan development team and advisory panel will recommend 4-1/4" escape ports in the PFMC crab plan.

Conclusion

Escape rings of 4-1/4" should be established as the legal size in Oregon because:

- (1) The states of California and Washington require 4-1/4" escape ports.
- (2) Oregon fishermen are concerned about the loss of legal crab when 4-3/8" ports are used.
- (3) The PFMC comprehensive crab plan will recommend 4-1/4" ports.
- (4) Most of the additional female and sublegal crabs entering pots will escape.

Recommendation

The staff recommends that OAR 635-36-130(2) be changed and that 4-1/4" escape ports be required. (Rewording involves only changing the 2 references to 4-3/8" escape ports to 4-1/4".)