

SEPTEMBER 1993 ANGLING REGULATIONS COMMISSION HEARING: STAFF STATEMENT FOR SPORT CRAB REGULATION DISCUSSION

Background

At the last angling regulations hearing in September 1991, the OFWC adopted the regulation allowing the harvest of female crabs in coastal bays. The rationale for this change was to provide an additional segment of the population for harvest in the often-crowded bay fishery. It was hoped that more crabs available would translate into less concerns with commercial bay crabbing as well as better crabbing success, particularly for shore-based crabbers fishing off fixed structures.

The rationale for allowing some fishing pressure on large female crabs was that they are not a critical component of the spawning stock since they are often in a terminal molt condition. The overall goal was to provide bay crabbers some added harvest opportunity. Staff felt that the removal of some of the large female crabs in the bays would be insignificant compared to the total biomass of female crabs in Oregon waters.

A problem of interpretation has developed along several stretches of ocean beaches. Sports crabbers were taking female crabs off the beaches and in the surf. It is not uncommon for female crabs to congregate in very shallow water in the surf zone or in the intertidal as their egg masses are developing. The intent of the original regulation was to keep the harvest in these areas limited to males only. The sex ratio is heavily skewed to females in these areas and a new target fishery would develop if allowed. As it is, the few legal males that are harvested along the beaches are taken incidental to other activities. It was not the intention of the Commissioners (in 1991) to create a new target fishery on female crabs along the beaches of Oregon.

A separate area of concern to sports crabbers has been the perception that illegal quantities of crabs are being harvested and perhaps even sold. The State Police have experienced problems sorting out large number of allegedly sport-caught crabs which are being held in live boxes. Some of the problems have been with typical sports crabbers and others with commercial crabbers that also engage in sport crabbing.

Proposed Changes

Attached is a copy of the proposed changes to the crab regulations. Parts B and C are revised to clearly reflect where and when crabbers may fish for which sex. These rewrites should help clarify the intent of the female crab regulation adopted in 1991.

Part D is new, adding a regulation prohibiting stockpiling more than 24 crabs in a single live box.

Suggested rewrite of OAR 635-39-130 (3)(c):

(c) Dungeness Crab:

(A) The daily catch limit is 12 crabs, 5 3/4 inches minimum size; measured in a straight line from edge of shell to edge of shell immediately in front of and not including the points;

(B) Legal size female crabs may be taken and retained only in bays and estuaries, not including the Columbia River. Undersized Dungeness, female Dungeness caught in the ocean (including beaches) or the Columbia River, and unwanted Red Rock crabs must be immediately returned unharmed to the water;

(C) The Pacific Ocean is closed to the taking of Dungeness crabs from Aug. 15-Nov. 30, except ocean beaches, tidepools, jetties and piers are open the entire year for the taking of legal size male Dungeness crabs only;

(D) It is unlawful to retain more than one person's possession limit of crabs in a live tank, cage or trap.

PETITION TO HARVEST FEMALE CRAB IN RECREATIONAL FISHERY

- At the September 1991 hearing on statewide angling regulations, the OFWC adopted rules allowing the harvest of female crab in coastal bays.
- The rule change was designed to provide an additional segment of the population for harvest in the often-crowded bay fishery. It was hoped that more crabs available would translate into less concerns for the commercial bay crab fishery as well as better crabbing success, in particular for shore based crabbers fishing off of fixed structures.
- The rationale for allowing some fishing pressure on large female crabs was that they are not a critical component of the spawning stock since they are often in a terminal molt condition. Staff felt that the removal of some of the large female crab in bays would be insignificant compared to the total biomass of female crabs in Oregon waters.
- Staff sought to clarify the rule at the September 1993 hearing on angling regulations as there was confusion over whether or not female crab could be harvested on ocean beaches. Staff recommended prohibiting harvest of female on ocean beaches, as egg bearing female crab sometimes congregate in very shallow water in the surf zone or in the intertidal as their egg masses are developing.
- Two or three members of the public testified in favor of going back to the original 'males only' rule citing observations of undersized female and egg bearing crab being taken. After listening to public testimony, the Commission rescinded the original rule and harvest of Dungeness crab was again limited to males only.
- Staff recommends deferring this petition for consideration under our next statewide angling regulation process. While staff does not feel there are any biological concerns, more public input is needed as this issue is controversial.