CRAB SEASONS AND ESCAPE PORTS

In 1973 Oregon entered into a cooperative State/Federal Dungeness Crab Management Program with the states of Washington and California, the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the Pacific Marine Fisheries Commission. A study team consisting of two economists and a biologist was hired to review the Dungeness crab fishery and management practices on a coastwide basis. Two of the initial tasks assigned to the study team were to evaluate the crab season opening dates and the use of escape ports in crab pots. The Management and Research Division has reviewed their evaluation and is recommending two changes in the current crab regulations.

Crab Seasons

Problem

For several years the opening date of the Dungeness crab season has been the subject of a great deal of controversy among the states of Washington, Oregon, and California. The states have opened their crab seasons on different dates and this has created enforcement problems, ill will among fishermen, and in some cases a disorderly fishery.

Background

The crab season opening date is based on the condition or meat content of the crabs. The problem is that crabs mature earlier in California and southern Oregon than they do in northern Oregon and Washington. California prefers to open their season, except for the San Francisco area, on December 1 and Washington prefers to open their season on January 1. Oregon, because the majority of the crabs off our coast are more comparable to those found in California, has opened at the same time as northern California. The season in Washington is set by regulation to open January 1, but they have on occasion opened December 1 by emergency action so that their fishermen have the opportunity to fish when the
other states are fishing and to alleviate the problem of out-of-state fishermen fishing ahead of the season off Washington, and landing their catches in Oregon.

Discussion

The study team concluded that any season which would result in different opening dates among the three states would aggrevate the disorderly fishery problem (non-resident fishermen fishing in areas closed to resident fishermen). A uniform January 1 opening would provide the greatest net benefits for any uniform season, but would do so to the benefit of Washington and to the detriment of California. A January 1 opening was not totally acceptable to all three states, but a compromise date of December 15 for opening of the crab season north of Point Arena California was agreed upon.

Recommendation

The staff recommends that the 1975-76 crab season in Oregon open on December 15, 1975, provided that Washington and California adopt the same opening date. If California and Washington fail to adopt December 15 as their opening date the staff recommends that Oregon's crab season opening date remain December 1.

Escape Ports

Problem

At the present time most crab pots used in the Dungeness crab fishery have at least one escape port for the purpose of allowing small crabs to escape. The problem is that there is considerable variation in the size of escape ports used and it is permissible to fish crab pots without escape ports in Washington and Oregon. California requires that crab pots have at least two escape ports of not less than four inches inside diameter. However, this size of port is not large enough to allow adequate escapement of sublegal males and female crabs.
Background

Escape ports in crab pots provide a means by which smaller crabs can escape. Reasons for requiring escape ports include: (1) handling mortality to sublegal male and female crabs is reduced; (2) injury to small crabs resulting from fighting is reduced; (3) loss from cannibalism is reduced; (4) if pots are lost the sublegal crabs have an opportunity to escape; and (5) they benefit fishermen by retaining the legal-sized crabs and reducing the amount of sorting needed to remove the sublegal crabs from their catch.

Discussion

Oregon and California biologists have collected length-width data from more than 2,800 male crabs. These data show that a crab of 6¼ inches in width has a length close to 4³⁄₈ inches. Since the smallest opening through which a crab can crawl is about equal to his length, the optimum size of escape ports with respect to the present 6¼-inch minimum size limit should be 4³⁄₈ inches.

Escape opening studies have shown that the larger the escape openings the more efficient the crab pots are for releasing sublegal crabs. In actual fishing operations some legal crabs may escape through an escape port of 4³⁄₈ inches, but it appears the loss to fishermen would be minimal and the potential savings of sublegal male and female crabs could be much greater.

In view of the above the study team recommended that Washington, Oregon, and California should adopt regulations requiring all crab pots to have a minimum of two escape ports of at least 4³⁄₈ inches inside diameter.

Recommendation

The staff recommends that all new Dungeness crab pots used for commercial fishing be required to have a minimum of two circular escape ports of at least 4³⁄₈ inches inside diameter located on the top or side of the pot. If escape ports are placed on the side of the pot, they shall be located in the upper half of the
pot. It is also recommended that a period of 5 years be allowed for altering or phasing out existing escape ports. Thus, by the 1979-80 season all crab gear would be required to have two escape ports of at least $4\frac{3}{8}$ inches inside diameter.

Nelson E. Stewart
Fish Commission of Oregon
Management and Research Division
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