

Staff Statement
For Public Hearing Feb. 16, 1984 on
Summer Dungeness Crab Fishery

EXHIBIT A
Taken out of
D.D.'s 1984 August
Crab Hearing
file.

4-6-94

Problem

A recent change in fishing effort in the summer part of the crab season has resulted in increased sorting and landing of unfilled crab and much unrest in the industry. Department staff believes the handling is excessive and that modification of the season structure should be considered by the Commission.

Background

Three previous hearings (6-18-82, 3-18-83, 8-26-83) considered the summer crab fishery. The specific issues were to extend, shorten or set the fishing season in the ocean. A petition by fishermen to open the 1983-1984 season early, was denied by the Commission.

Biology

The harvest of unfilled crab during the summer is basically a resource use rather than a biological issue. When crab shed their shells during June to August they will not be ready for harvest until December. However, if crab molt during April to June some of them will be filled and ready for harvest by August which has been the case for the past three years. The degree to which unfilled crab can withstand handling is moot. The single scientific study available suggests 15% mortality. Fishermen views vary from "near zero" to "almost all" unfilled crab succumbing from being handled.

The Fishery

Prior to 1977 relatively few boats fished for crab after May 31 and those that did averaged only three trips per month. Since 1977 fishing effort has increased during the summer and in 1982 and 1983 averaged 120 boats which made six trips per month. Landings made after June in 1982 were 2,580,000 lbs and

882,000 lbs in 1983. The average annual catch for the 1977-81 period was about 520,000 lbs. As a percent of the annual catch 1982 and 83 were 29 and 22 as compared to an average of 4 percent for 1977-81.

Observations made at sea in 1982 and 1983 during August and September showed unfilled crab being caught of which only one in 10 was kept. Even so, of the crab landed, 30-70 percent was unfilled i.e. not of "No. 1" grade. In some ports there was also heavy sorting at the dock with considerable "dead loss" of crab thrown back into the bays. Sampling at sea and comments from fishermen revealed that most of the unfilled crab was caught at depths deeper than 20 fathoms.

Other states

California and Washington usually open at the same time as Oregon and Washington closes the same time as Oregon with some exceptions. California usually closes July 31.

Industry Views

Fishermen--A recent survey was done by the Oregon Dungeness Crab Commission to obtain a broader opinion from fishermen on crab seasons. Of 376 questionnaires sent to fishermen, 170 were returned (Table 1). A season that would open December 1 and close June 15 received most favor (33%). Closing dates of August 15; August 15 except closed outside 15 fathom after June 15; and September 15 ran close seconds (20%). The two least popular seasons by a wide margin were a flexible season based on crab condition and a year round open season. Fishermen rejected the option of altering a season once it has been set by a nearly 3:1 margin, and thought crab condition was poor in the summer by a 2:1 margin. The survey also revealed that the north coast was evenly split between a year round season and one that closed September 15. Newport split between August 15 and September 15 closures while Coos Bay was

evenly split between August 15 and June 15 closures. Brookings showed a preference for a June 15 closing.

Dealers--Usually fishermen's views have been heard when crab regulations are considered, but dealers from one-man crab stands to large processors are also affected by regulation changes. Information presented here is a summary compiled from the Crab Commission questionnaire and staff's contact with dealers.

Crab dealers favored a fixed season, not a variable season based on "in season" crab condition. They varied, however, on what season was best. Twenty-five percent wanted a June closure. The rest favored a closure in August or September with none of the dealers preferring a year around open season.

Our records show that about 40 dealers handle crab during the June to September 15 period of whom 30 were contacted by staff. On the average 40% of their crab landings were made during the June to September 15 period although eight of them landed more than 50% during the summer. Most obtain their crab directly from local boats, but some of the smaller dealers buy from larger companies. Some dealers obtain Dungeness crab from California, Washington, and Alaska and some deal in other crab including king, tanner and box. Few handle crab taken from Oregon estuaries. Smaller dealers who dealt mostly with crab were opposed to a summer closure while the large, more diversified companies favored a summer closure.

Discussion and Management Options

The problems facing the crab industry are not new, but the timing and magnitude are. The central issue is a rapid buildup of fishing effort late in the season when a large portion of the legal crab in the ocean are unfilled. This results in intensive sorting at sea, unknown mortalities from handling, dead loss at the dock, lower prices to fishermen and processors, and an inferior product for consumers.

Management of the crab resource as per ORS 506.109 is for "---the present and future generations of the citizens of this state". Industry's view as summarized above reflects their interests, but must be heard since access to the resource for most of the public is through the industry. Getting greatest yield and best access, a general public interest, is of primary concern.

To the above end a season that balances losses due to handling of crab and gains from summer harvest (public access) is needed. Closing the crab season near the end of spring will permit a high level of harvest of the resource and do so when the yield per crab is high and sorting at sea is low. Maximum yield would result. However, doing so would remove a logical source of supply for the summer crab market that includes the peak months of the tourist season. The degree that the demand for fresh crab can be satisfied by frozen, estuary caught or imported crab is uncertain.

While the benefits of a summer fishery are difficult to measure the price paid in lost pounds of crab for delaying closure can be estimated. Using a 9-1 discard to retention ratio, a 15% mortality on crab handled and released and an 80% level of filling out 1.9 of a pound of potential crab meat is lost for each pound of crab meat landed during the summer months. Applying this to the 1982-83 and 1983-84 (estimated) crab landings about 1,300,000 lbs of meat yield was lost between the 2 years. That would have increased landings in those years by 70% and 30% respectively.

Several options for managing the summer crab fishery have been aired and are offered below. They are identified by the closing date only since the Dec. 1 opening date is not under discussion.

Option 1. Close September 15 (Status quo). This option is favored by some people especially on the north coast and by a number of small boat

fishermen. However, contrary to views expressed at previous hearings only about one-half of Astoria crabbers favor this option. Coastwide, the majority of fishermen do not favor this option without some provision to keep unfilled crab from being landed.

Choice of this option could be conditioned by scheduling a Commission review in early August of the season's character, past and projected.

Option 2. Close June 15. This option would be the most effective in reducing the summer effort and thus the take of unfilled crab. It would have the most adverse impacts on the small boat crabber and the smaller dealers who cater mostly to tourists. However, some local crab from Oregon estuaries may be available along with frozen crab from Alaska.

Option 3. Close June 15 outside and September 15 inside 15 fathoms. This option would have less impact on industry yet should protect the bulk of the unfilled crab most of which was caught outside 20 fathoms. This option would allow a few fishermen to move gear inside 15 fathoms and fish until the scheduled closing date September 15. The greatly reduced fishing area should keep latecomers from re-entering the fishery, and effort at a relatively low level. Conflict for space within the crab fishery and perhaps other fisheries is probable.

The staff feels that retention of a summer ocean crab fishery is desirable but the high cost in lost yield requires keeping the harvest level low. This will supply some crab for summer markets and a modest fishery for those fishermen who rely on a summer fishery. While crab prices are higher by up to 50% in the summer over the following December the difference will not offset the estimated loss of yield in pounds. Restricting the fishery to inside 15 fathoms during the summer months with Sept. 15 retained as the closing date should improve the character of it.

Recommendation

The staff recommends that the season close on June 15 outside of 15 fathoms and on September 15 inside 15 fathoms.