

## Crab Population Up

Crabs once again are relatively abundant off the Oregon coast and particularly so along the south coast. Oregon crab fishermen, through the first two months of the 1976 season, landed 4.2 million pounds of crab. This is nearly one million pounds more than was landed during the entire 8½ month 1975 season. Over 50% or 2.2 million pounds of this catch was landed at Coos Bay and the ports south of there. The north coast, Tillamook to Astoria produced 1.4 million pounds and the central coast, Depoe Bay to Florence produced 0.5 million pounds. The 4.2 million pounds in the first two months of fishing compares very favorably with production for average or better than average crab production years.

Department of Fish and Wildlife biologists are not sure how long this good fishing will last. They are quick to point out that there are only so many legal crabs available each season and that 84 to 94% of the legal sized crab are harvested annually. Fishermen and processors from Astoria to Brookings all report that fishing success is declining and several boats are preparing for the shrimp and salmon seasons that will soon open. Twenty years of data show that from 18 to 60% of the total season landings are made during the months of December and January. Weather, price disputes, and sea conditions determine the landings for these months. Based on the mean production figures for the first two months of the crab season, the 1976 season could be a better than average year. However, staff biologists feel that the 1976 total will be near the 7 million average annual catch.

People frequently ask why there is such wide variation in crab abundance. Department biologists frankly admit that they don't know. They believe some unknown environmental condition determines the success or failure of individual year classes at some time in the four years between hatching and attaining the legal size of 6¼-inches. The biologists point out that under existing regulations the males mate once or twice prior to become legal-sized and with complete protection of the

females we always have an adequate brood stock. Whatever the cause may be, it is coastwide in occurrence, affecting crab production from British Columbia to California. It is also somewhat cyclic, ranging over a 7-10 year period.

For the 1976 season, crabs are again relatively abundant and if history repeats itself, they will be abundant during the next several seasons.

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