

For Immediate Release: May 26, 2016

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CRABBERS LEAD EFFORTS TO ADDRESS WHALE ENTANGLEMENTS

Monterey Bay – California's commercial fishing industry is adopting a suite of emergency actions to minimize the possibility of whale interactions with Dungeness crab gear, including voluntarily standing down from productive crab grounds around the Monterey Submarine Canyon to avoid high concentrations of whales feeding in the area. Crabbers are coordinating with state and federal agencies and sharing best fishing practices among themselves to reduce the likelihood that migrating whales become entangled in crab gear.

Citing an uptick in reports of whale entanglements in and around Monterey Bay, commercial crabbers led by the Alliance of Communities for Sustainable Fisheries (ACSF) called an emergency Skipper Workshop on 24 May to share information and develop a plan to reduce the potential for gear interactions with whales. The meeting was heavily attended by crabbers from Monterey, Moss Landing and Santa Cruz, the three harbors most active in the Monterey Bay crab fishery. The California Department of Fish & Wildlife (CDFW) was also present to provide data and regulatory information that facilitated the crabbers' course of action.

Crabbers at the Skipper Workshop adopted recommendations that included voluntarily reducing fishing effort on the Monterey Canyon rim for the rest of the 2015-16 fishing season. The Canyon rim is a highly biologically productive area utilized by whales and crabbers alike. Fishermen may move gear to areas with fewer whales, or stop fishing earlier than would be required under state law. The crab season normally ends in the area on June 30.

Additionally, a best fishing practices guide is circulating to all members of the fleet with crab gear in the Monterey area. The guide details gear modifications and entanglement reporting practices that will reduce impacts to whales that come into contact with crab pots. It was developed by the California Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group, which is comprised of crab fishermen, conservation groups, and government agencies working collaboratively on solutions to reduce whale entanglements. Fishermen resolved to put the best practices into action and to work with the Working Group.

“Crabbers are the first to recognize the need for preventing whale entanglements, and are in the best position to report and mitigate interactions that do occur,” said Kathy Fosmark, co-chair of the ACSF. “However, it’s incumbent on us to step up to the plate when, despite our best efforts, bad things happen. The fleet is willing to do what it takes, including voluntarily standing down from some of our most productive fishing areas, to make sure this fishery remains sustainable and marine mammals remain safe.”

“It’s not surprising to see the crab fleet take ownership of this issue and try to find a solution,” said Tim Sloane, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations. The measures they’ve adopted to reduce entanglements reflect their unparalleled knowledge of the ocean and the fishery, and that’s why they’re going to be effective.”

“Our state’s crab fleet have proven time and time again that they will take the necessary steps to ensure the long term sustainability of the Pacific and the marine mammals who call the California coast home,” said Senator Mike McGuire (D-North Coast). “The recent increase in entanglements is deeply troubling for all involved in this issue. I applaud the fishermen for being proactive with this important first step and we hope to solve this growing challenge once and for all by passing SB 1287, which will create a statewide program to remove old or lost crab gear from the ocean. We have to take these necessary steps to protect whales and keep our ocean clean.”

Senate Bill 1287 – The Whale Protection & Crab Gear Retrieval Act – would create a regulatory program with that would allow fishermen to retrieve Dungeness crab fishing gear that is lost or misplaced after the crabbing season closes. Lost gear can create interaction hazards for both marine mammals and salmon fishermen, whose lines can tangle with untended crab lines.

Reports of entangled whales in the Monterey Bay have increased over the past weeks as whale migrations pick up and the Summer whale watching season begins in earnest. Additionally, there are more crab fishermen on the water and looking out for entanglements than is usual at this time of year, due to the delay in the opening of the Dungeness season because of concerns over domoic acid. Crabbers who struggled through the fishery closure have only a few weeks to recover losses incurred during this shortened fishing season, but the fleet remains committed to protecting the environment.

Crabbers in Monterey and statewide will continue to work with CDFW, NOAA Office of Protected Resource, the conservation community, the California Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group, and all other interested stakeholders to seek effective mitigation measures that reduce the fishery’s impacts on marine mammals.

ACSF represents the Monterey, Moss Landing, Santa Cruz, Port San Luis and Pillar Point fishing communities and harbors and was formed to allow for an organized community voice for fishing and fisheries in response to current and future state and federal legislation that affects fishing, fisheries, and attendant coastal and marine environments. ACSF’s areas of interest is to include a wide body of constituents’ needs, specifically: all people who fish, all public or private agencies with an interest in fishing, all non-profit marine protection agencies, and any persons

with an interest in fishing, preservation of traditional fishing culture and coastal and marine conservation.

PCFFA is the largest association of commercial fishermen on the West Coast. For 40 years, PCFFA has led the industry in assuring the rights of individual fishermen and fighting for the long-term survival of commercial fishing as a productive livelihood and way of life. PCFFA member associations support sustainable fisheries and healthy aquatic ecosystems on which the fishing industry depends.
