

## **Joint Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture Crab Hearing – March 20, 2019 Talking Points, California Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group**

*Provided by Kelly Sayce, Strategic Earth Consulting*

### *Introduction*

- My name is Kelly Sayce, principal and co-founder of Strategic Earth Consulting. Together with my colleague Rachelle Fisher, I have the pleasure of serving as an administrator and facilitator for the California Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group (Working Group).
- Thank you for the opportunity to provide this update to the committee on the Working Group's efforts and activities.

### *Working Group Priorities*

- The Working Group is charged with advising the state on strategies and solutions that help to support thriving whale populations along the West Coast, and a thriving and profitable Dungeness crab fishery. To accomplish this goal, the Working Group continues to focus their attention on all aspects of addressing the issue of whale entanglements, from gear innovations to development of the Risk Assessment and Mitigation Program (RAMP).
- The RAMP, which was piloted during the 2017-18 fishing season and is in full operation as of January 1, 2019, utilizes information on four factors to identify and assess elevated levels of entanglement risk and determine the need for voluntary/mandatory management options to reduce risk of entanglement. The following list are the four risk factors that are reviewed and assessed by the Working Group, they include: rate of entanglements, whale concentrations, fishing dynamics, and oceanographic/forage (or prey) conditions.
- When any of these factors indicate an elevation in entanglement risk, a group of experts—agencies, fishermen, nongovernmental organizations, researchers, and others—convene as an Evaluation Team to review/request the best available data, investigate how any one factor is informing/influencing another factor (e.g., relationship between season delays, seasonal whale migration patterns, and prey distribution) and, as needed, develop recommended management measures for the Director of CDFW's consideration.
  - The RAMP relies on a variety of data inputs and research tools including aerial surveys, landings data, whale watch data, oceanographic survey information, entanglement reports, and on-the-water observations from fishermen. Per the Working Group's 2018-19 Recommendation Memo, requests were made for support to improve available RAMP data streams and the OPC has taken steps to be responsive to these requests.
  - An active fishermen's text thread has been providing a direct channel to CDFW managers to share real-time information on what they were seeing on the water with respect the gear concentrations and whale distributions. This has also served as an important tool for the facilitation team and agencies to reach out to the fishermen when there was a concern of elevated risk.
  - Evaluation Team process steps and outcomes are shared broadly via the Working Group's email list, the DCTF email list, posted on the Working Group's webpage (OPC site), and other channels.

- As the committee is aware, Senate Bill 1309 gave the CDFW Director the ability to respond in cases of increased risk. CDFW is developing a regulatory package to formalize the RAMP in consultation with the Working Group and has a statutory deadline to do so by November 2020.
- The Working Group most recently met on February 14, 2019 to walk through the four risk assessment factors. The results of the Working Group's assessment identified that the risk of whale entanglements in the Dungeness crab fishery is presently moderate to low. There are concerns that the risk of entanglement is anticipated to increase through the end of the season, as humpback whales return to the area in April coupled with a ~50% chance of an El Niño, bringing prey species closer to shore where gear is located, however fishing effort continues to decline this season due low numbers of harvestable crab this season.
- The Working Group is meeting again next week as an Evaluation Team (and at select times throughout the remainder of the season) to continue reviewing the factors and the relative risk of entanglement. Reports of their progress will be made available via the aforementioned channels shortly following the meeting(s).
  - The Working Group continues to reflect on how to improve the RAMP to increase its responsiveness, including learning from the spring/summer months during the 2017-18 season.
  - In 2018, the number of whale entanglements increased in May-August, which included months when the Dungeness crab fishing season was closed. The Working Group is working with scientists and agencies to evaluate these late-in-the-season entanglements (observed) and how the RAMP could be refined to address this increase as we head into the spring/summer of the 2018-19 season.

### *Looking Ahead*

- The Working Group continues to be committed to work in partnership with CDFW, the Legislature, NMFS, OPC, and the DCTF to provide recommendations to reduce whale entanglement risk.
- For more information about the Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group, please contact [info@cawhalegroup.com](mailto:info@cawhalegroup.com) or visit the Working Group's webpage on the OPC's website: <http://www.opc.ca.gov/whale-entanglement-working-group/>.