



May 24, 2016

Dear Dungeness Crab Vessel Permit Holder,

You are receiving this letter to solicit your support and cooperation to reduce whale entanglements off California. What has already been a difficult season due to delayed opening caused by domoic acid has recently become more challenging. Over the last few years, and currently again in 2016, reports of entangled whales (mostly humpback whales) are occurring at very high rates. Although the original locations of many of these entanglements are unknown, much of what is known has involved entanglements originating from Dungeness crab gear set in the Central California area. As has been the case since 2014, a large portion of the reports are coming from the Central California area, particularly in and around Monterey Bay. We need your help to reduce these events immediately.

The issue of whale entanglements was brought to the attention of the California Dungeness Crab Task Force (DCTF) at the April, 2015 meeting. Later that year, the Ocean Protection Council, Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the National Marine Fisheries Service hosted a meeting to share information amongst interested parties. This led to the formation of the Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group which met several times in late 2015 to develop short and long term strategies for reducing whale entanglements.

The unique circumstances of this year have led to a high concentration of gear that is not typical for this time in the year. Given these unique circumstances, the Department reached out to NMFS West Coast Region Protected Resources Division (NMFS-WCR-PRD) to solicit interim, immediate recommendations to minimize the risk of entanglement of whales off the coast of California this year. Based on feedback from NMFS-WCR-PRD, the Department is recommending the following be put into practice immediately:

- Fishermen should remove gear, and avoid setting gear, in areas where humpback whales are likely to be feeding or aggregating such as near the shelf edges and canyons where krill and fish are expected to be abundant, giving humpback whales some foraging space free of gear in those areas that are known or expected to be productive for their prey.
- Fishermen should consider minimizing the use or profile of trailer buoys. Although we cannot confirm that trailer buoys are the cause of entanglements, there have been some recent entanglements with whales in Dungeness crab gear that have included multiple trailer buoy set-ups. Trailer buoy lines are commonly part of the gear that ends up entangled on animals. In particular, we understand that use of more complex trailer buoy systems may be more common as gear is being set in deeper waters. Recognizing that trailer buoys are used for very specific and important reasons, we recommend that fishermen consider working to improve the trailer buoy system/concept so it meets their needs, but reduces the extent of the line profile in the water.

- Fishermen should work cooperatively to reduce the amount of gear currently set in the Monterey Bay area. The relative level of fishing effort (in terms of the number of traps being set – and as reflected by landings data) has been significantly higher throughout a large portion of the southern part of the Dungeness crab fishery since 2014. This period coincides directly with an increase in the number of reports of entangled whales. Since Central California is a known “hot spot” for humpback whale activity, especially from April-November, it is expected that an increase in fishing effort in this area leads to increased risk of entanglements and likely an increase in the number of entanglements that occur.
- All in the fleet should implement best practices in the configuration and deployment of gear and participate in the many efforts of the Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group to develop long-term solutions to this problem. The Best Practices Guide that was developed by the working group is enclosed.

Thank you for your attention to this most important issue and your cooperation in addressing this problem.

Sincerely,



Craig Shuman
Marine Region Manager

Enclosure

ec: Penny Ruvelas
Long Beach Office Branch Chief – Protected Resources Division
NOAA Fisheries West Coast Region

Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group

Dungeness Crab Task Force

Best Practices Guide:

California Dungeness Crab Fishing

Ways to Minimize Whale Entanglement Risk

**Whale Entanglement
Response Hotline
(877)-SOS-WHAlE
(877)-767-9425
Or Hail USCG on
Channel 16**

Suggestions to minimize entanglement risk in fishing gear:

- When trap is in the water, use the proper length and weighting of lines to **keep the line between the trap and buoy running vertical and taut**. Whales are more likely to become entangled with slack lines. Use the minimum amount of scope required to compensate for tides, currents, and weather, as necessary. When changing set location throughout the season, adjust the length and weighting of trap lines as necessary to maintain taut vertical lines.
- Configure gear to **minimize the extent of line that could be floating at the surface** at any time. Use sinking or weighted vertical lines and minimize the amount of trailing surface gear used.
- Maintain gear to **ensure lines and buoys are in good working condition** and will not break under natural conditions such that gear could become lost or irretrievable. Lost gear contributes to marine debris and increases the risk of whale entanglement.
- **All gear should be clearly marked** consistent with applicable regulation. All gear should be maintained so markings are clearly legible to facilitate correct identification of the origins of gear involved in entanglements.
- **Avoid setting gear in the vicinity of whales** whenever possible.
- **Avoid setting gear in the trawl zones or in shipping lanes**. Large vessels in heavily trafficked areas, like shipping lanes, can displace fishing gear. This can result in tangled gear which may increase the risk of entanglements.
- **If you encounter lost gear: Notify the owner or put out a call on the local VHF**. You can also report lost fishing gear to the Sea Doc Society by phone (1-888-491-GEAR) or online at: <http://www.seadocsociety.org/report/>

Gray whale



Humpback whale



Reporting entangled whales:

- **Report entangled whales IMMEDIATELY** to the NMFS whale entanglement response hotline at **1-877-SOS-WHAlE (1-877-767-9425)** or hail the **U.S. Coast Guard on Channel 16**. See tips on reverse side for details on reporting. If possible, stand by for responders.
- **Respond promptly if you are contacted** by NMFS, CDFW, or any other government agency regarding a whale entangled in your gear and provide as much information as possible regarding your fishing gear and practices. Gaining a better understanding of where, when, and how entanglements are occurring is essential in working to prevent them in the future.



If you have a suggestion for reducing entanglements in fishing gear, contact Justin Viezbicke, NMFS West Coast Region, Whale Entanglement Response Coordinator, Justin.Viezbicke@noaa.gov, (562) 980-3230.



**Whale Entanglement
Response Hotline
(877)-SOS-WHALE
(877)-767-9425
Or Hail USCG on
Channel 16**

If you see an entangled whale...

Record the following information to help responders:

- Date
- Time of last sighting (24 hr clock)
- Your name, vessel name/call sign, phone #
- General or specific location (lat/long)
- Species
- Approximate size/age class
- General condition of whale
- Is the animal moving (speed/heading)?
- Description of gear (markings, colors, shape)
- Weather/seas (wind, swell, visibility)
- If possible, document with photos (see photographing tips below)

Information to assist in reporting:

Gray and humpback whales are the species most commonly reported entangled, although blue whales, fin whales, killer whales and sperm whales have also been reported.

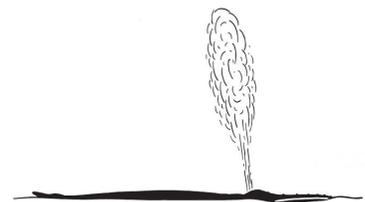
Gray Whale

Body coloration mottled gray; frequently with yellowish to reddish whale lice on head and other parts of the body; hump about 3/5ths back on the body (no dorsal fin); heart-shaped blow; fluke (tail) raised before dives; up to 48 feet long; migrates between Alaska to Baja California, though some individuals, can be resident along the coast all year; most commonly observed late December through June; cow/calf pairs tend to be closer to shore late March through May.



Humpback Whale

Body dark gray, often with white patches on underside; flukes can be all dark to nearly all white; long flippers are dark above and white on underside; blow erect and bushy on top half; flukes raised before diving; up to 52 feet long; migrates from Central America and Mexico to southern British Columbia; most commonly observed in May through November; typically congregate near deep water canyons for feeding but can be found nearshore if following prey.



If possible, **stay and observe the whale** from a safe distance until trained responders arrive. Entangled whales are unpredictable and potentially dangerous for rescuers.

Photographing entangled whales:

Whale: side view of dorsal fin (or hump); flukes (especially underside if raised); head; any part of the body where gear may be present.

Entanglement: buoy(s); tags; lines on the body; trailing lines (including distance from whale); netting (if present); other gear if present.



Best Practices Guide was developed by the California Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group

Illustrations provided by Pieter Folkens

