

California Changing Domoic Acid Protocols for Upcoming Crab Season

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Anticipating potential harmful algal blooms that could produce domoic acid in Dungeness and rock crab fisheries, state leaders and lawmakers are changing management and outreach efforts to avoid a repeat of the disastrous 2015-16 season. Commercial and recreational seasons were delayed or closed last year due to high levels of the toxin.

Industry and state officials identified problems with last year's season and potential solutions before the Joint Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture in Sacramento on Wednesday.

Dr. Craig Shuman, Marine Region Manager, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, said commercial crabbers received roughly half of the total harvest value for their crab than they did in 2014-15 due to shorter time to fish and fewer landings.



Committee Chairman Mike McGuire noted he and most of the California crab industry are frustrated with the slow process by the U.S. Department of Commerce to declare the fishery a failure and with Congress to appropriate funds to compensate fishermen and processors. Shuman said the process includes a lot of moving parts but the department is supplying the Department of Commerce staff the data they need to make the declaration.

In preparation for this season, Shuman and CDFW Environmental Program Manager of the Invertebrate Program Sonke Mastrup, said the CDFW, working with other state agencies and the Dungeness Crab Task Force, could make several changes to make the upcoming season flow more smoothly.

One option is to allow areas to open with evisceration orders in place, instead of keeping an area closed completely.

"A lot of our fleet didn't want to fish under an advisory, originally," Mastrup said. However, in subsequent discussions with industry, the department learned processors often don't even wait for state or federal officials to issue evisceration orders. If a processor hears of any potential contamination, they eviscerate immediately, Mastrup said. Federal Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) rules are already in place to ensure

seafood is safe. "That is great news," he said, and gives the department greater confidence that fishing under an advisory would work.

Another option is to streamline the protocols for domoic acid testing. Mastrup said California has twice the number of ports and sampling areas than Oregon and Washington combined; it took a lot of time to get the testing done. The lab processed more than 4,000 samples over the season; it normally does only a few hundred.

Panelists also supported testing being initiated in October and funding industry's time to set and retrieve gear and process the crab instead of relying solely on volunteers as potential ways to ensure sampling. McGuire said compensation will likely be discussed in the state's next budget cycle.

As far as outreach, panelists noted the message distributed last season was not as good as it could have been. Coordinating a unified message between several agencies that assures the public that crab available for sale is safe and the public's health is not at risk is difficult. The message and resulting media frenzy instead created public wariness of not just crab, but all seafood, said North Coast Fisheries President Mike Lucas.

"We learned the way we announce to the public is as important or more important," Lucas said. "Consumers walked by the fish case," Lucas said. We definitely have a problem with what is said in the press, he added.

McGuire said the idea of a state crab commission, like one of the other agricultural commodity commissions, has been suggested. It could, like the Oregon Dungeness Crab Commission, concentrate on marketing and promotion and help shape the message. One problem with a commission idea is that it would require self-assessments from the industry -- and on a bad revenue year to boot. McGuire said more discussions with processors and fishermen are necessary to explore commission options.

With regard to the upcoming crab season, Dr. Raphael Kudela, Lynn Professor of Ocean Health at the University of California Santa Cruz, said the potential for toxin production this year is different than last year. The widespread "blob" that stretched along the West Coast isn't apparent, but pockets of unusually warm water are already happening along the California Coast. These areas could product the algal blooms that result in domoic acid production, but another key ingredient to algal blooms is that they also require food, such as in the form of runoff.

Kudela monitors the changing conditions and said this year the blooms are just now starting to ramp up in some locations. This year, they didn't really start until mid-June or so, unlike in 2015, when the blooms became evident in the spring. Unfortunately, that could also mean some blooms extend later in the year, which could line up with the start of crab season, he said.

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