

NEWS RELEASE

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
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Commercial crab fishery delayed on Washington's south coast

OLYMPIA – State shellfish managers have delayed the opening of the commercial Dungeness crab fishery on a portion of Washington's southern coast to allow more time for tests to ensure that crabs are free of marine toxins.

The commercial fishery from the Columbia River north to Klipsan Beach on the Long Beach Peninsula was scheduled to open Dec. 1. This delay also includes the Willapa Bay commercial fishery.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) delayed the opening following talks today with fishery managers in Oregon and California. Commercial crabbing will be closed along the entire Oregon coast. Public health officials in California are still evaluating domoic acid levels along the state's northern coast.

Recent tests indicate crab caught along Washington's ocean coast are safe to eat, but shellfish managers decided to conduct additional testing before opening the commercial fishery. Recreational crabbing will remain open in all coastal waters. However, additional testing will be conducted. Crabbing is also open in several Puget Sound marine areas, where marine toxins in crab have not been an issue.

The department will review test results from the state Department of Health before setting an opening date on the south coast, said Dan Ayres, coastal shellfish manager for WDFW. Ayres said he hopes the test results allow for the season to open by mid-December.

"We're taking extra precautions due to the high volume of crab typically caught within the first weeks of the commercial opening," he said. "We want people to feel confident the crab they buy is safe to eat." Ayres said commercial crabbers generally support WDFW's decision.

Domoic acid, a natural toxin produced by certain types of marine algae, can be harmful or even fatal if consumed in sufficient quantities. Cooking or freezing does not destroy the toxin in shellfish. Commercial crab fisheries along the West Coast were delayed last year due to a similar issue with domoic acid, which has also disrupted Washington's razor clam fisheries over the last 18 months.

WDFW typically opens the area north of Klipsan Beach to state commercial crabbing later in the season in coordination with tribal co-managers. Crab now coming into the market from tribal fisheries currently open along the central and northern Washington coast have been tested and are safe, Ayres said.