

Experts gather to reduce whale interactions with Dungeness crab fishing gear

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Populations of humpback whales and gray whales along the U.S. West Coast are relatively high. That's the good news. But high numbers of whales, productive fishing grounds, and a changing ocean environment that has delayed the crab fishing season in recent years may be contributing to the uptick in the number of whales encountering more fishing gear. Some encounters lead to entanglements of whales in fishing gear, such as the ropes and floats that mark the location of crab pots, and these numbers have been increasing in the last few years to a level of concern. While these entanglements are proportionally rare events and some whales can free themselves of the gear, no one wants to see whales entangled.

Many steps have already been taken to reduce these problems, and last week in Portland, Oregon forty-five people from Washington, Oregon, and California gathered to explore further steps that can be taken, including Dungeness crab fishermen, gear specialists, marine mammal biologists and disentanglement specialists, lost gear recovery experts, conservation groups, and federal, tribal and state agency representatives. Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC) hosted the workshop thanks to funding from NOAA's Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program and with the assistance of Oregon Sea Grant. Funding from this grant also will allow for collaborative research projects working in partnership with fishermen to test gear innovations on the ocean.

Presentations followed by discussions with the diverse group led to suggestions in four different categories:

- Gear innovations and technologies
- Spatial and timing changes in fishing practices
- Removal of lost gear
- Research needs

All three states and their fishermen have already been pursuing a number of these approaches, and will be exploring what more can be done.

"There are a lot of things the fishing industry has already done that may help avoid entanglements", explained Randy Fisher, executive director of the PSMFC. "For example, while not specifically designed for this purpose, Oregon and Washington have limited crab fishing in spring and summer when there are higher densities of whales here. California has a Dungeness Crab Fishing Gear Working Group that is dedicated to working on this issue, and Oregon is starting a similar group in the coming months. All three states have implemented programs to incentivize the recovery of lost gear to reduce entanglement risk. There has also been a lot of communication to fishing groups about best practices and how to report entangled whales so they can be relocated and freed of gear by highly trained response teams."

Gear innovations discussed during the workshop that could be tested include: using sinking or neutral lines; increasing line visibility with color, lights, or acoustics; changing the length of trailer lines; a time-release cutter tool that could be programmed to not release during normal fishing activities, but would release during an entanglement; deflection sleeves like pool noodles or swivels near the buoy; line free gear with remote releases; and elimination, where possible of lead weights and line splices. “The costs and practicality of these innovations will need to be explored”, said Fisher. “It will be hard to test the effectiveness in reducing interactions or entanglements, since luckily these are rare events, but there is research that can be done. “

A report from the workshop and a copy of the presentations and materials will be posted on the PSMFC website by April 15th: www.psmfc.org/crab

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