

Crab season stalled, Bolinas pots beached

by Justin Nobel

Jeremy Dierks should have been pulling pots of dungeness crab on Monday. Instead he spent the day in harbor, prepping traps and plugging a hydraulic hose on his 21-foot boat.

The start of crab season was delayed until the beginning of December in waters three miles out from the coast, from Pedro Point to Point Reyes, in an order issued by Governor Schwarzenegger after the recent Cosco Busan spill. While Dierks' pots sat idly in stacks of four along Wharf Road in Bolinas, fishermen from northern California and Oregon prowled nearby waters for crab. Two Oregon boats dumped a 100,000 pound load of crabs in Monterey last week, a catch estimated at a quarter of a million dollars.

"The boats from up north come down here with an unlimited amount of pot and catch hundreds and hundreds of pounds of crab," said Dierks. "Local fishermen are stuck with the leftovers."

Crab politics

Bay Area crabbers such as Dierks were outraged that the governor only closed a sliver of sea rather than delay the whole season. Out-of-towners can fish offshore waters, explained Dierks, but locals are prevented from heading out. The biggest catches of the season—which runs through June—are usually within the first few weeks, when as many as 18-20 crabs can fill a pot. Afterwards, numbers quickly dwindle to only a couple of crabs per pot. Crab boats capable of laying 1500 pots cruise south from northern California and Oregon to fish the Central California opener, which is the only one that begins November 15 rather than December 1. Out of more than 600 vessels licensed to fish the Central California season, only 125 hail from the Bay Area.

"These guys from out of state don't give a shit," said Larry Collins, president of the San Francisco Crab Boat Owners Association, a group that includes crabbers from Half Moon Bay north to Bodega. "They just come in, take their crab and leave."

Crabs are kept alive onboard by drawing fresh seawater into large tanks. Bay Area boats have to pass through closed waters to get to areas deemed safe for crabbing. This means they are pumping potentially oiled water onto their catch. Out-of-town boats can chug down from Fort Bragg, pull pots offshore, then drop them off in Monterey. But the local crab boat owners association vowed to not begin crabbing until a clean bill of health is issued by the state. The Department of Health plans to issue a statement tomorrow.

"Dungeness crab is a religion here," said Collins, who has been crabbing for more than 20 years and goes by the nickname Diver Duck. "We all care about each other because there's not very many of us left."

Before Governor Schwarzenegger issued the ban, he consulted the Office of Spill Prevention and Response, which was tracking the slick's movement by helicopter, as well as the Department of Fish & Game.

"Based on where they saw slicks and sheens they knew a little bit of oil had moved out," said Pete Kalvass, who manages invertebrate fisheries, such as crab, for Fish & Game. But there was only a minor amount of oil offshore, said Kalvass, mainly in thin fingers that stretched seaward from the coast.

"There's no script for something like this," said Collins, "We care about the health of the consuming public that these crabs are going to."

Crab fishermen are concerned that oil sunk to the bottom of San Francisco Bay, which along with Humboldt Bay is one of two major dungeness crab nurseries along the coast of California. Currents carry free floating larval crabs, called megalopae, into the bay, where they eventually settle on the seafloor and develop into adult crabs. Had the Busan spill occurred during the late winter and spring, when crabs are commonly in the megalopae stage and drift along the water's surface, the larval dungeness could have been very affected by the oil, says Kalvass, but by this time of year crabs are on the bottom.

Dr. Jacqueline Michel, a geochemist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Office of Response and Restoration and a member of a scientific SWAT team that gets sent around the world to monitor the effect of oil spills, said that oil will not sink to the seafloor. As oil cools and mixes with water it congeals and becomes thicker, forming tar balls, the pudding-like globs that washed ashore area beaches earlier this month.

Pounding surf can add a "sugar coating of sand" to tar balls, said Michel, and outgoing waves can roll the balls, now a bit heavier, back out to sea. However, it is rare that they roll far, making it unlikely for the oil to affect dungeness, which can live in as much as 300 feet of water, said Michel.

The one time they found a crab species affected was at a spill in Florida in 1991, in which a very heavy oil washed ashore mixed with a lot of sand. Tar balls rolled back out to sea, smothering the adjacent seafloor. Horseshoe crabs, which live in the sandy stretch between where the tide breaks and the waves crest, were severely poisoned.

But with this spill the crabs seem safe. Michel's group tested for oil at various water depths near Pier 39 where there are intake valves for the San Francisco Aquarium. They found no oil.

"I seriously don't believe there is a risk of significant amounts of oil affecting benthic communities," said Michel.

The crab samples that will determine tomorrow's announcement concerning the closure were taken from sites off Stinson Beach, Pacifica Beach and Bodega Bay. Two tests will determine if crabs are safe for eating. One is a test for polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons, carcinogens present in oil, cigarette smoke and burnt steak. The other requires trained testers to detect the degree of oil tainting by rating the crab's taste and smell on a scale from zero to four. It's possible for crabs to have a clean bill of health from the hydrocarbon test but still show some tainting, in which case the Department of Health will issue a statement saying that crabs are okay to eat despite the fact that they may taste like oil.

Crab lore

Dierks caught his first fish in Pine

Gulch Creek when he was three years old. Later he would ride his bike out to the Nicasio Reservoir and other area lakes and fish for catfish, bass and trout. When he was ten he went on his first ocean trip with Bolinas fisherman Josh Churchman. After that, said Dierks, "I knew pretty much right away what I wanted to do." By the time he was 15 he was skippering his own boat.

On Monday, Dierks explained the lure of fishing for crab as he worked on his boat, an unnamed older model Boston Whaler that he keeps tied up beside Wharf Road. "I like to go stealth," says Dierks. Sometimes crabbers from outside the area will recognize him as a local and try to follow him to the good crabbing spots, he said.

Dierks wore a blue hooded sweatshirt with a drawing of a salmon made by his father across the back. His face was red and his hair looked bronzed from years of sun. He knelt beside the boat's small wooden pilot house as he attached a brass fitting to the end of a hose that feeds oil to a hydraulic winch is used to pull up crab pots.

"We need to get to work," said Alvie, Dierks' 52-year-old deck hand, who stopped by to say hello. He wore rubber boots and a sweatshirt.

"We have a lot of time to get to work," said Dierks with a wry grin.

As of Wednesday evening, Dierks, Churchman and all the other Bodega and San Francisco crabbers were still waiting patiently to toss their pots, hoping there was something left for them beneath the waves.

"The average Joe can't go out there and make a living fishing," says Dierks. "It takes skills, experience and knowledge of the area and the ocean. If you lose that you might never ever get it back, and that would be sad."



Jeremy Dierks is one of only four commercial Bolinas fishermen left. On Monday, with the crab season on hold, he spent the day in harbor, prepping traps and plugging a hydraulic hose on his 21-foot boat. Photo by Justin Nobel.