



State of Washington
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

Mailing Address: PO Box 43200, Olympia, WA 98504-3200 · 360 902-2200 · TDD 360 902-2207
Main Office Location: Natural Resources Building, 1111 Washington Street, Olympia, WA

February 2023

Subject: Prohibited Invasive Species regulations and identification for European green crab

Dear shellfish/shellstock shipper, wholesaler, or dealer,

In December 2022, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Police confiscated approximately 30 pounds of live European green crabs from a seafood market in Seattle. Marketed as “green crabs”, the crabs were bought from a distributor in Massachusetts.

European green crabs are regulated by the state of Washington as a Prohibited Level 1 Invasive Species, meaning they may not be possessed, introduced on or into a water body or property, or trafficked (transported, bought, or sold), without Department authorization, a permit, or as otherwise provided by rule (RCW 77.135.040).

Native to western Europe, these shore crabs are considered to be among the world’s most harmful invasive species. They are known to predate on native shellfish including clams, mussels, and oysters, dig up eelgrass critical for salmon and forage fish, and severely degrade estuaries and other nearshore ecosystems. They may also compete with native crab species.

While green crabs are already present in Washington, further introductions of new individuals can still have adverse effects. Green crabs from distant populations (e.g., the U.S. Atlantic Coast) could increase the genetic diversity of populations in Washington, potentially creating hardier or more resilient populations. New introductions could also facilitate their spread within the state, making control and management of the species that much more difficult. Reducing the risks of these secondary introductions is a critical part of statewide management efforts.

Invasive species sold for food or fishing bait are sometimes released (intentionally or unintentionally) and are known to be among the causes of their spread in other states and regions. This recent event at a Seattle seafood market is an important reminder of the regulations around European green crabs and the responsibility of seafood sellers, buyers, and shippers to avoid potentially spreading them.

WDFW is working to increase outreach to shellstock sellers and shippers regarding the state’s invasive species regulations, how they can find out which species are Prohibited, and what is needed for *lawful possession of dead prohibited level 3 species for personal or commercial use* as described in WAC 220-640-051.

For more information please see: <https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=220-640-051>

A list of Prohibited invasive/nonnative species can be found on the Washington State Legislature website: <https://app.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=220-640&full=true>.

Identifying and reporting European green crabs

European green crabs are shore crabs and are found in shallow areas—typically less than 25 feet of water—including estuaries, mudflats, intertidal zones, and beaches. They are not likely to be caught by crabbers or shrimpers operating in deeper water but may be encountered by clam and oyster growers and harvesters or those crabbing in shallow areas as well as off docks or piers.

While large populations are present at certain locations along the Washington Coast—particularly Willapa Bay and Makah Bay—as well as in Lummi Bay in Whatcom County, European green crab numbers remain low across other areas of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, San Juan Islands, and Bellingham and Padilla bays. Small numbers were detected in northern Hood Canal in 2022, followed rapidly by heavy trapping. European green crabs are not currently found within central or south Puget Sound and should not be introduced anywhere in the state.

The most distinctive feature is not their color—which can vary from reddish to a dark mottled green—but the five spines or “marginal teeth” on each side of the shell. There are three rounded lobes between the eyes; and the last pair of legs are somewhat flattened. Identification guides and other resources are available at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/invasive/carcinus-maenas>

If you find a suspected European green crab in the wild or for sale in Washington, report it immediately using the form at <https://wdfw.wa.gov/greencrab> or contact ais@wdfw.wa.gov.

Additional resources, permits, and management support may be available for shellfish growers, private tidelands owners, or other aquaculture or fisheries stakeholders encountering European green crabs. Please contact WDFW Shellfish or Aquatic Invasive Species staff for more information.

Sincerely,



Kelly Susewind

Director

cc: Allen Pleus, European Green Crab Emergency Incident Commander
Capt. Eric Anderson, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Police
Ruth Musgrave, Natural Resource Policy Advisor to Governor Inslee