



Fish and Wildlife Commission Presentation Summary Sheet

Meeting date: January 26, 2024

Agenda item: Petition: Amend the Marine Area 13 Crab Fishery

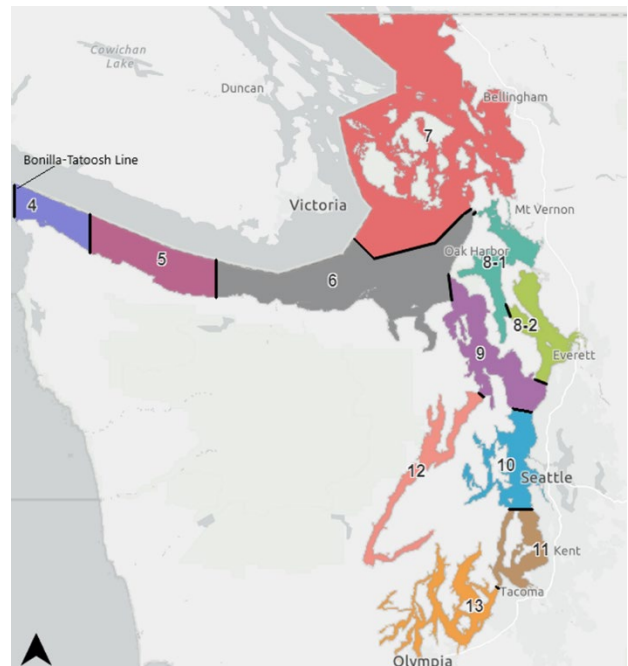
Presenter(s): Aaron Dufault; Puget Sound Shellfish Manager, Katelyn Bosley, Puget Sound Crustacean Lead Research Scientist

Background summary:

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission received a petition requesting the Commission to open Marine Area 13 - South Puget Sound, for recreational Dungeness crab harvest (attached). The petitioner challenges the previously reported harvest numbers and the justification for the conservation closure implemented in this area starting in 2018.

Preceding the co-manager decision to close Marine Area 13 (MA 13 – South Puget Sound) to all state and tribal fishing in 2018, Dungeness crab harvest in MA 13 by state and tribal fisheries peaked at 289,500 pounds in 2012 and declined to 9,500 pounds by 2017; a decline of ~97% over 6 years. In MA 13, the catch of legal-size Dungeness crab males declined from 1.1 crab/trap in 2014 to 0.3/trap in 2018, or 72.7% decline in catch per unit effort. We also observed a similar decline in our annual crab test fisheries, which began in 2015. Due to these significant declines in catch, WDFW and tribal co-managers made the decision to close MA 13 to Dungeness crab harvest to protect the remaining population and promote recovery. The conservation closure is also an action receiving continued support from WDFW's Recreational Crab and Shrimp Advisory Group.

Since 2018, WDFW Puget Sound Shellfish staff and tribal co-managers have continued to conduct test fishery surveys in MA 13, to assess the recovery of the Dungeness crab population. Updated results continue to show that the Dungeness crab population in MA 13 has not recovered to harvestable levels, as indicated by the continued low test fishing catches (Figure 1). Of particular concern, are the low numbers of sub-legal males and females; indicating the



reproductive potential of the local population is low, and that little successful recruitment is occurring since the conservation closure was implemented. The low level of abundance observed in MA 13 is in strong contrast to MA 9, where annual test fishing is also conducted, and the area supports robust annual recreational and commercial harvest opportunities (Figure 1).

To help inform current and future management of Dungeness crab in Puget Sound, WDFW, tribal co-managers, The Puget Sound Restoration Fund, and other industry and academic entities, are engaged in the Pacific Northwest Crab Research Group (PCRG), a large collaborative research consortium, which is tasked with promoting and supporting sustainable Dungeness crab populations in the Pacific Northwest. The group is engaged in projects seeking to understand larval and population dynamics of Dungeness crab in Washington. Currently, fishery managers have a limited understanding of Puget Sound Dungeness crab population recruitment dynamics and genetic structure. The group is collecting larval crab in light traps at many sites around Puget Sound and the Salish sea. Preliminary results suggest south Sound has very low larval supply – consistent with low numbers of sub-legal crab documented in test fishing activities. Through the collaborative research efforts coordinated by PCRG, we hope to inform future management actions to promote recovery of MA 13 Dungeness crab.

Given the continued low abundance of the MA 13 Dungeness crab population, WDFW staff recommend that the Fish and Wildlife Commission deny the petition.

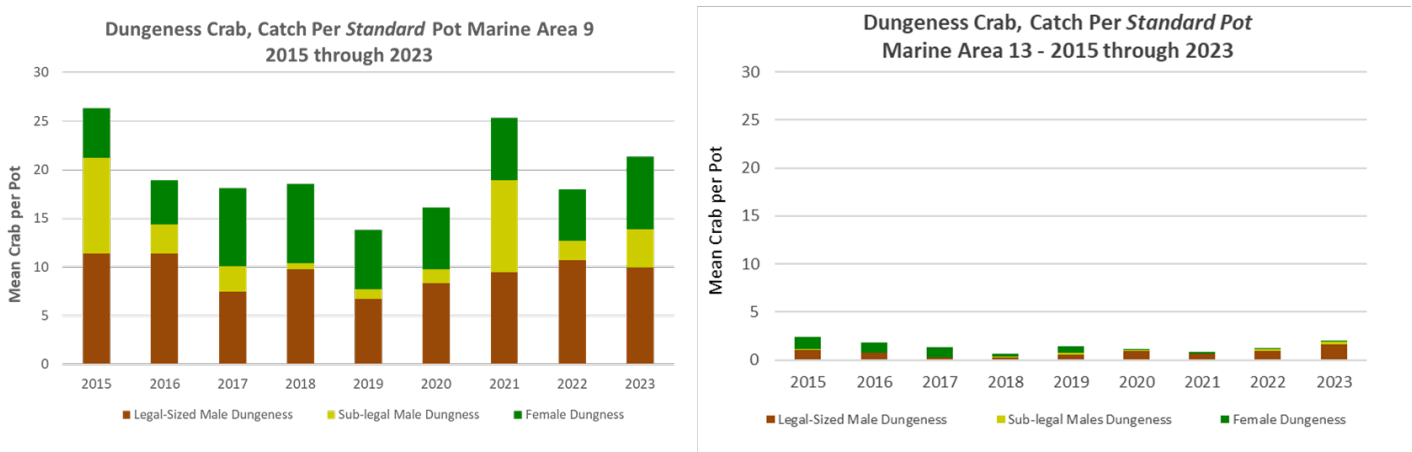


Fig. 1. Annual Dungeness crab test fishing catches from MA 9 and MA 13 for legal and sub-legal males and females.

Staff recommendation: Deny the petition and direct staff to continue to monitor Dungeness crab populations in Puget Sound and marine area 13, and to work with the Recreational Crab and Shrimp Advisory group to provide meaningful harvest opportunities in Puget Sound.

Policy issue(s) and expected outcome:

The management of Puget Sound Dungeness crab resources must consider both harvest opportunity and conservation. Continuing harvest on a depressed population does not support WDFW’s conservation mandate, nor lead to sustainable fishing opportunities for crabbers. Due to limited productivity, the Dungeness crab population in MA 13 is insufficient to support a meaningful harvest opportunity currently.

Fiscal impacts of agency implementation:

None

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

Because this is a rulemaking petition, no public engagement has occurred. We have discussed the potential of reopening MA 13 to crab harvest with our Recreational Crab and Shrimp Advisory group.

Action requested and/or proposed next steps:

Deny the petition.

Draft motion language:

Option A (preferred) Motion: I move to deny the petition to amend recreational Dungeness crab rules in marine area 13.

Is there a “second”?

If so, then motion maker states the basis for the motion; other Commissioners discuss views on motion; amendments, if any, proposed and addressed.

Option B Motion: I move to accept the petition to amend recreational Dungeness crab rules and direct the Department engage with tribal co-managers to reopen marine area 13 to Dungeness crab harvest.

Is there a “second”?

If so, then motion maker states the basis for the motion; other Commissioners discuss views on motion; amendments, if any, proposed and addressed.

Post decision communications plan:

Commission staff will provide a letter to the petitioners with the outcome of the commission decision regarding the petition.
