



Fish and Wildlife Commission Presentation Summary Sheet

Meeting date: NA

Petition Title: Change the complete closure of MA13 to all crabbing to allow sport red rock crab

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Background summary:

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission received a petition requesting the commission to open a portion of Marine Area (MA) 13 - South Puget Sound, for recreational red rock crab harvest. The petitioner proposes to open a portion of MA13 north and west of a line between Johnson Pt and Devil's Head (Fig. 1) using only handheld gear including: hand, dip net, rings and snares.

Marine Area 13 Closure and Dungeness Population Recovery

MA 13 was closed to all state and tribal crab fishing in 2018, following a 97% decline in Dungeness crab harvest over 6 years. In response to the significant decline in catch, supported by test fishing data, WDFW and tribal co-managers closed MA 13 to Dungeness crab harvest to protect the remaining population and promote recovery. WDFW rules only allow fishing for red rock crab when fisheries are open for Dungeness crab; therefore, red rock crab was also closed to harvest in MA 13 beginning in 2018. This concurrent closure for red rock crab helped ensure the remaining Dungeness crab population is not impacted by fishing and handling pressure, which would occur during a red rock only fishery.

WDFW Puget Sound Shellfish staff and tribal comanagers continue to conduct test fishery surveys in MA 13, to assess the recovery of the Dungeness crab population. Red rock crab, while not the focus of the survey, are caught in these surveys (Figure 2). Results continue to show low catch of Dungeness crab, indicating that the population in MA 13 has not recovered to harvestable levels. Of particular concern are the low numbers of sub-legal males and females, indicating the reproductive potential of the local population is low. The red rock population in MA 13 has varied over time and has continued to decline following the closure in 2018, despite a complete prohibition on harvest.

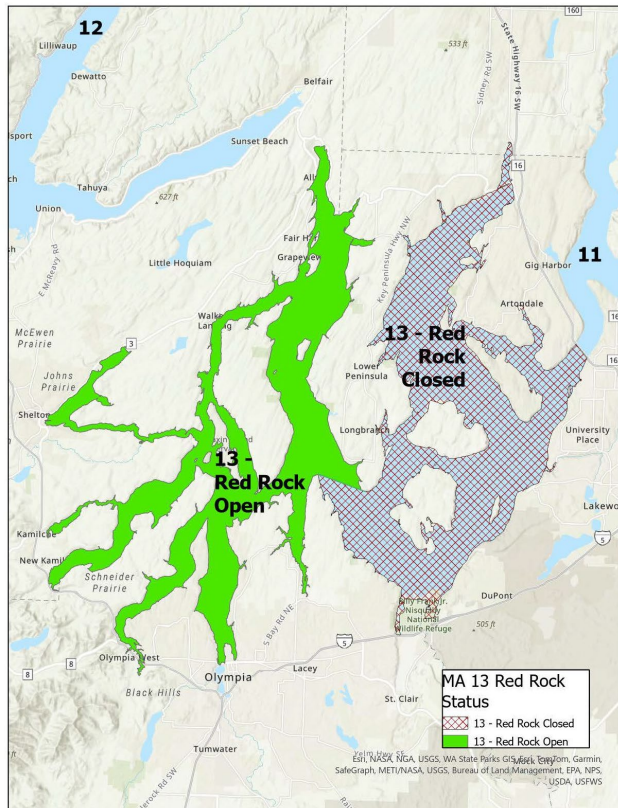


Fig. 1 Proposed red rock only harvest area in MA 13 north and west of a line projected from Johnson Point (47°10'40.8"N, 122°48'53.3"W) to Devil's Head (47°10'01.2"N, 122°46'01.5"W) shaded in green.

As indicated above, WDFW recreational harvest red rock crab is only allowed when open for Dungeness crab harvest. A similar management approach is implemented for both species of crab for the following reasons:

Comanager agreement

WDFW and Treaty Tribal comanagers have structured the Puget Sound crab fisheries based on the biology and conservation of the Dungeness crab resource. Assessments of effort and harvest are focused on Dungeness crab, while red rock crab monitoring is incidental to these. Unlike the Dungeness crab fishery, biological data to develop a harvest strategy for red rock crab would be needed to assess mating requirements, molt timing, sex ratios, and abundance trends, which are critical for conservation-based management. Scaling up harvest pressure through a selective red rock crab fishery (Treaty Tribal and State), when critical information is missing or incomplete, presents a risk of depleting red rock crab populations in addition to causing harm to an already depressed Dungeness crab population. Recent discussions with Tribal fishery managers, including the Squaxin Tribe, suggest the comanagers are not supportive of WDFW opening red rock only fishing in MA 13, citing concerns with handling mortality and sustainability of the fishery.

Sustainability of South Sound Crab Fisheries

Continued monitoring of crustacean resources (both crab and shrimp) in south Puget Sound has shown troubling trends of declining population abundance since WDFW started conducting surveys in this area. While red rock crab are more abundant than Dungeness crab (Fig. 2), the catch of red rock crab in Marine Area 13 in test fisheries has fluctuated, even following the closure in 2018. In addition to the test fishing WDFW and tribal comanagers conduct, The Pacific Northwest Crab Research Group (PCRG; www.pnwcrab.com) monitors juvenile crab abundance using light-traps throughout Puget Sound. The six years of light-trap data has shown very limited larval crab abundance in south Puget Sound since monitoring began in 2019, causing greater concern about overall ecosystem health and impacts to population productivity.

Catch Accounting

WDFW does not currently have resources to develop and come to agreement with Tribal comanagers on a statistical method to estimate the recreational harvest of a fishery targeting red rock crab. The Dungeness crab catch record card (CRC) does not include red rock crab, and crabbers are not required to record any red rock crab catch. Methods for generating a catch estimate would have to be developed, tested, and agreed-to by all South Sound comanagers and would require additional staff to monitor the fishery and collect data necessary to generate a catch estimate. Monitoring needs for open Dungeness crab fisheries in Puget Sound currently exceed staff capacity, as current resources limits our monitoring coverage to 1-2 marine areas per year. Monitoring a South Sound recreational red rock crab fishery would come at the cost of Dungeness crab sampling in other areas, which the Puget Sound Tribal comanagers are not likely to support. Puget Sound Tribal comanagers have recently communicated growing concerns over the WDFW's lack of catch accounting for recreational red rock crab harvest in Puget Sound.

Potential for Dungeness crab handling/poaching

A goal in keeping all crab fisheries closed in MA13 is to reduce or eliminate the potential for repeated handling of the vulnerable Dungeness crab resource. Opening of a red rock crab only fishery, would likely lead to repeated handling and release of adult and subadult Dungeness crab, increasing the probability of handling mortality. The petitioner attempts to mitigate this concern by proposing to open only a portion of MA 13 that is north and west of a line between Johnson Point and Devil's Head (Fig. 1), citing WDFW crab test fishing data and requiring only handheld gear be used. Dungeness crab abundance is greatest near the Nisqually river delta. However, the overall population status across the entire marine area remains poor. WDFW continues to believe minimizing the handling of any Dungeness crab in MA 13 is crucial for population recovery.

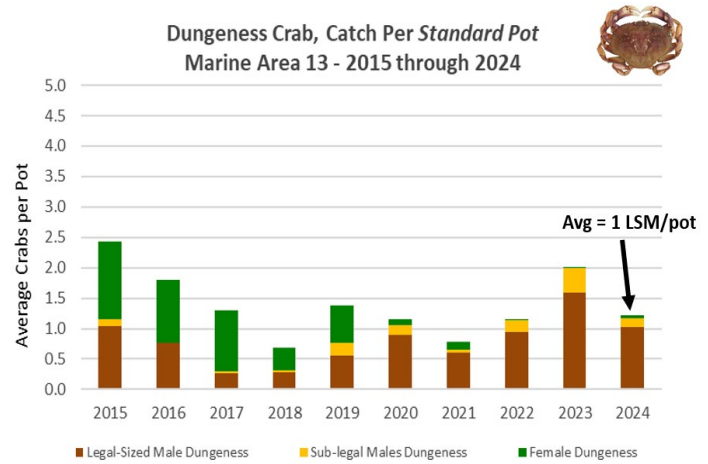
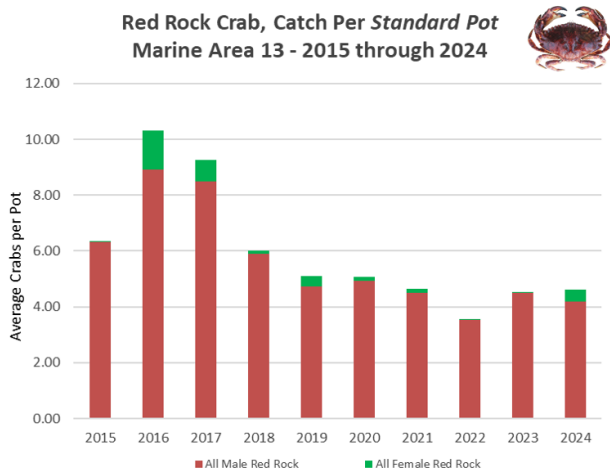


Fig. 2. Average catch of red rock crab collected from test fisheries in MA 13 from 2015-2024 (left) and average catch of Dungeness crab (right).

For the reasons described above, WDFW do not support additional harvest opportunities on red rock crab in MA 13, until more science, research, and comanager discussion can take place.

Staff recommendation: Deny the petition and direct staff to continue to monitor Dungeness and red rock 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 when and where appropriate.

Policy issue(s) and expected outcome:

The MA 13 Dungeness and red rock crab fisheries have been closed since 2018. In denying the petition, no new policy issues are expected.

Fiscal impacts of agency implementation:

None

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

While no specific public engagement has occurred for this petition to reopen MA 13 to red rock crab only harvest, WDFW Puget Sound Shellfish staff have discussed this topic with our Recreational Crab and Shrimp Advisory group and with angler groups, whom we meet with multiple times throughout the year and engage in recreational crab season planning.

Action requested and/or proposed next steps:

Deny the petition.

Post decision communications plan:

Commission staff will provide the letter to the petitioners with the outcome of the director/commission decision regarding the petition. *Form revised 1-20-21*
