

My Word - Times-Standard 11-28-2015

Hearing out the crab season

By Senator Mike McGuire and Assemblyman Jim Wood

The North Coast is undeniably crab-country. Our traditionally cold coastal waters have been perfect for producing some of our nation's healthiest crab harvests.

This harvest, a time-honored tradition since the mid-1800s here in Northern California, represents a change of season. We gather with our neighbors at local markets to purchase the freshest crab just days after the season opens. We come together to celebrate the holidays with friends and family by cracking crab and thousands of us roll up our sleeves and attend crab feed after crab feed to support our best local charities — usually toting personal butter warmers and lemon wedges.

And, all of those crab pots we see on the docks, represent thousands of jobs.

So, when North Coast crab tested with high levels of a naturally occurring toxin, fishermen, industry leaders and public officials all came together, as partners, to call for a delayed opening to the crab season to ensure the public's safety. This is despite the fact that the livelihoods of local crab fishermen, their families and crews will be adversely impacted and our Thanksgiving dinner tables free of our favorite fresh crustacean.

Delaying the crab season opener is not a decision that is taken lightly. We love to enjoy one of California's great delicacies and traditional natural foods — fresh crab — but there is truly nothing more important than the public's health and safety.

This industry sinks or swims based on consumer confidence. This is why we all want to be absolutely sure the California crab you share this holiday season (and always) is not only delicious — but healthy and safe.

Unusually high ocean temperatures have caused large and persistent algae blooms, which in turn, have caused high acid levels in California's Dungeness crab. Fortunately, though, when ocean temperatures drop, acid levels will drop too, and Dungeness and rock crab will be safe to eat again. Of course, the California Department of Public Health and the Department of Fish and Wildlife will continue to conduct extensive tests — each week — to ensure consumers are receiving California crab free of high acid levels. The good news: Ocean conditions are starting to improve, but we need to see two consecutive weeks of clean tests — in each port — in order to kick off the commercial season.

This issue has far-reaching impacts and we are looking forward to an open and honest conversation about the status of the crab season delay, its impacts, as well as a look at the ocean conditions that caused the change in toxicity levels. As Chair and Vice Chair of the Joint Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture, we invite you to join the conversation and attend a special hearing: "The California Dungeness and Rock Crab Fishery: Public Health, Ocean Conditions and Maintaining a Strong Coastal Economy."

The hearing will be held in Santa Rosa at the Steele Lane Community Center on Thursday, Dec. 3 from 3 to 6 p.m. We have invited a panel of experts focused on protecting the public's health, ocean conditions and our crab dependent coastal economy. We will also hear from fishing industry representatives who will discuss the impacts of the delay on their livelihoods.

This hearing will provide an important opportunity to bring together industry leaders and decision makers so that we

can work together and know what to expect for the rest of this crab season, and what to be prepared for in the future.

The Dungeness crab fishery is in the top tier of California's commercial fisheries. Values have exceeded \$95 million per year and long-term averages of nearly \$60 million. It's a way of life here on the North Coast and we are looking forward to filling our plates with fresh crab just as soon as the season opens. *Senator Mike McGuire and Assemblyman Jim Wood represent the North Coast in the California legislature. They also serve as chair and vice chair of the Joint Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture.*