

# Conditions Favor California Dungeness Season as Warm Blob Still Threatens Oregon, Washington

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It was all good news, hopeful news, for the California Dungeness crab industry Tuesday in Bodega Bay. For Oregon and Washington crabbers though, a warning: it's too early to tell what might happen.

California Sen. Mike McGuire, D-Northern Calif., chairman of the Joint Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture, opened a crab season outlook and modern aquaculture hearing in Bodega Bay, Calif., by saying he believed the worst is behind us, referring to the devastating presence of domoic acid in crab last season. Crabbers in California were delayed for months from setting their gear and the seafood market as a whole suffered from the bad news.

Witnesses from California state agencies and the University of California – Santa Cruz, testified that so far, all signs favor environmental conditions for lower domoic acid levels in crab this year.

“Toxicity may have peaked in September, said Dr. Raphael Kudela, Lynn Professor of Ocean Health at UC-Santa Cruz. As we transition in to winter, it may just go away, he added. Ocean temperatures off of California already are cooling, resembling a more normal weather cycle.

This year, *Pseudo nitzschia*, the organism responsible for producing domoic acid, was spatially more variable, not nearly as prevalent as it was this time last year. Cooler waters and upwelling

have helped disperse it. Those algal blooms also are pushed further offshore this year, Kudela said.

“That’s really good news for crab . . .,” Kudela said. That could change if those waters get pushed back onshore, but he doesn’t expect that to happen.

Patrick Kennelly, chief of the Food Safety Section of the California Department of Public Health, said the agency started testing earlier this year than last year. So far, he said, levels have been dropping. Much of the crab has been tested clean so far.

“We’re continuing to see that improvement,” Kennelly said, noting he’s cautiously optimistic fishermen will be able to drop their gear in November and December.

Kennelly said the agency does routine bivalve testing and that razor clams have been holding onto domoic acid and not getting rid of it – and that’s different. Similarly, some of the rock crab in Half Moon Bay and Bodega Bay never did resolve their levels of domoic acid.

Oregon recently closed all razor clamming and mussel harvesting statewide due to domoic acid levels.

Everyone generally agreed this year would be better for California, not just in terms of whether the industry can harvest and process the crab, but also in terms of how to deal with it: potentially closing areas so fishermen in some districts can fish, better testing protocols, etc.

“We did learn a lot,” California Department of Fish and Wildlife Environmental Program Manager Sonke Mastrup said. “We are better prepared than we have ever been for what’s coming.”

Mastrup said the agency is working to be more flexible and respond to the needs of the industry while keeping consumers safe.

“Our goal is to create as much opportunity for them to fish as we can,” he said.

### **Warm water 'blob' still impacting Pacific Northwest**

While the science so far seems to support a favorable California season, the prognosis for seasons in Oregon, Washington and coastwide seasons in 2017 are fuzzy.

McGuire asked UC-Santa Cruz Professor Kudela whether the warm water conditions largely responsible for the harmful algal bloom last year was still present.

“Actually, we’re cooler than normal,” Kudela said, but scientists are tracking a warm patch of water in the Pacific Northwest. Kudela said that blob of warm water has the ability to change weather patterns, potentially eliminating the upwelling that brings cooler waters to the surface. It also could change the jet stream. If winter storms are relatively weak this winter, that blob may not dissipate and warmer conditions could return in the spring.

McGuire picked up on Kudela's train of thought and asked whether Oregon and Washington crabbers will have challenges this season.

"Quite likely they will have impacts," Kudela said. A persistent drought in the West has shut down the Columbia River plume that acts like a barrier in the ocean and keeps harmful algal blooms from reaching the coast.

More than likely, we'll see these blooms hitting the coast, Kudela said.

Kudela added that looking beyond this year, these weather patterns and the warm water anomaly in the Pacific Northwest are very similar to recent activity.

This looks like it did prior to 2015, he said.

The Central California commercial crab season could open on Nov. 15 if testing continues to show crab are clean. Northern California, Oregon and Washington seasons typically open on Dec. 1, if domoic acid levels are low, meat content meets standards and fishermen and processors have negotiated opening prices.

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