



Meeting Summary

Oregon Dungeness Crab Advisory Committee

April 15, 2026, 9:00am – 1:00pm

Attendance

ODFW facilitators: Brittany Harrington, Jessica Watson, Cathleen Vestfals, Troy Buell, Justin Ainsworth

Present members: Crystal Adams, Susan Chambers, Cody Chase, Bob Eder, Scott Hartzell, Ryan Howell, Pogy Lapham, Rick Lillienthal, Aaron Miller, Mike Retherford, Gary Ripka, Heather VanMeter, Seth Whitsett, Justin Yager

Non-members: Aaron Ashdown, Cari Brandberg, Melissa Clemens, Jingyun Duan, Shon Landon, Lindsey Noordman, Jill Smith, Valerie Stephens, Josh Whaley

Welcome and Agenda Overview

(slides 1-3 of the [meeting presentation](#))

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) convened the Oregon Dungeness Crab Advisory Committee (ODCAC) on April 15, 2026. ODFW welcomed both in-person and virtual participants and noted that, while the meeting was open to the public, discussion would be prioritized for ODCAC advisors.

ODFW Updates: Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission Petition

(slide 4 of the [meeting presentation](#))

ODFW provided an update on a petition submitted by representatives from the Center for Biological Diversity, Oceana, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the American Cetacean Society. The petition proposed a range of regulatory changes related to pop-up gear, late-season vertical line restrictions, public notification of entanglements, and emergency closures following entanglement events. At the February 20, 2026 Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission (OFWC) meeting, ODFW presented a review of the current entanglement record, existing risk reduction measures, ongoing conservation plan (CP) work, and planned rulemaking efforts. The petition generated substantial written comments and public testimony. After deliberation, the OFWC voted to deny the petition and directed ODFW staff to continue with their planned rulemaking processes and ongoing coordination with National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to secure Endangered Species Act (ESA) coverage.

ODFW Updates: Planned Future Rulemaking

(slide 5 of the [meeting presentation](#))

ODFW provided an overview of the rulemaking efforts it plans to bring to the OFWC at their August 2026 meeting. This package will include the five-year evaluation of Oregon's existing risk-reduction measures, proposed vessel monitoring requirements, and a proposal to establish a pop-up and longline experimental fishing gear permit program. In addition to these items,

ODFW is also considering bringing forward a proposal to permanently move the implementation date for late-season measures from May 1 to April 1. Beyond the August meeting, ODFW anticipates additional rulemaking may be needed, depending on the results of ongoing gear testing, continued engagement with stakeholders, and federal review of the CP.

ODFW Updates: Conservation Plan Development (slide 6 of the [meeting presentation](#))

ODFW provided an update on the status of its draft CP, which covers the Central America and Mexico distinct population segments of humpback whales, as well as blue and fin whales. Staff shared their current understanding of the key remaining steps in both the CP development process and the associated Incidental Take Permit (ITP) application.

ODFW is actively incorporating feedback received from NMFS' Office of Protected Resources (OPR) at the end of January and continues to meet with the NMFS ITP team every two weeks to work through revisions. The agency is targeting mid-May for submission of the next full draft. That draft will undergo what ODFW anticipates will be a final round of NMFS review, which will include not only the ITP team but also NMFS' general counsel and Section 7 biologists. This full team review is expected to take several months.

Following that review, ODFW will work with OPR to address any remaining issues, with the goal of submitting a formal ITP application by the end of the year. Once submitted, NMFS will conduct a formal sufficiency review to determine whether the plan is "adequate and complete," a process that may also take several months and may involve additional coordination with ODFW.

After sufficiency is confirmed, several major federal processes will begin simultaneously, including National Environmental Policy Act review, Section 7 consultation, and authorization under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), each with its own public comment requirements. NMFS has indicated that these combined processes typically take 12–18 months, though they intend to streamline steps wherever possible.

ODFW noted ongoing uncertainty regarding the MMPA authorization pathway. To receive a Section 10 permit under the ESA, the state must also obtain a Section 101(a)(5)(E) authorization under the MMPA. Based on current guidance, the only available pathway appears to require that a Take Reduction Plan be developed (or in development) that includes the commercial Dungeness crab fishery. Because it is not yet known if or when the crab fishery will be included in a Take Reduction Team process, this remains a significant unresolved issue in the overall timeline.

Participants asked ODFW for a clearer explanation of the CP process, how it functions, what protection it offers, and whether it shields the fishery from litigation. ODFW explained that the purpose of pursuing an ITP is to secure a 15-year authorization that sets specific allowable incidental take numbers for whales. The permit application would be developed in partnership with NMFS, formally submitted for review, and then opened for public comment. Once issued, it would provide an authorized level of incidental take. Participants asked whether the permit numbers would be tied to whale population status and how the plan would adapt as conditions

change. ODFW noted that the CP includes provisions for adjusting elements over time based on new information.

Much of the discussion focused on the challenges of limited data, evolving science, and making decisions amid substantial uncertainty. Several participants expressed frustration that recent management decisions such as depth or date restrictions seemed reactionary and were not discussed through an advisory meeting. ODFW explained that the decisions were made in response to elevated entanglement levels at the time and emphasized the importance of maintaining low entanglement rates through adaptive management. They also noted that the fishery continues to evolve with improvements in gear and vessel efficiency.

Participants asked how to report dead whales encountered on the water. ODFW confirmed that fishermen should call the NMFS' marine mammal stranding hotline, but that ODFW will also ensure any information reported to them is documented and conveyed to NMFS.

ODFW Updates: Season Opening

(slide 7 of the [meeting presentation](#))

ODFW provided an update stemming from ongoing industry concerns raised to the OFWC about safety risks associated with season openings, particularly during severe winter weather. As part of these discussions, ODFW reviewed the current pre-soak allowance, which permits crabbers to set gear 73 hours prior to the 9:00 a.m. season opening, and noted that some stakeholders have suggested extending this window to reduce congestion and improve safety. ODFW also clarified barging rules and emphasized pre-soak timing and barging logistics appear to be the most viable areas for continued discussion. ODFW noted that other ideas raised through public comment, such as tying season start date to price negotiations or establishing weather-based season start criteria, are not being pursued further. Price negotiations fall outside ODFW's authority, and weather-based designations present significant challenges due to differences among ports and the difficulty of forecasting conditions consistently. Overall, these conversations reflect ODFW's ongoing effort to balance industry needs, safety considerations, and regulatory clarity in managing the commercial Dungeness crab fishery.

Discussion of season opening issues touched on price negotiations, safety, and early season stressors. Some suggested surveying the fleet and processors or exploring models like Newfoundland's state-mediated opening price to increase predictability. Lengthening pre-soak and limiting or eliminating barging were raised repeatedly, with some fishermen arguing that a longer pre-soak would remove the need for barging and others countering that many small boats depend on barging. Participants noted that any barging changes should be considered alongside pre-soak adjustments because the two issues are interconnected.

Fishermen raised concerns about the timing of depth or date restrictions and questioned whether these should remain permanent or be treated as adaptive tools. Many felt the fleet had inadequate opportunity to weigh in on the temporary move of the late-season measures start date from May 1 to April 1, which several believed was based on incomplete science. Fishermen emphasized that they need advance notice and clear communication to prepare safely and avoid last minute operational challenges, particularly in areas where the California Current shifts

early. There was broad agreement that issues such as April vs. May late-season measure implementation, 30 vs. 40 fathoms, and pre-soak duration should be discussed coastwide rather than decided rapidly during the season. Port-specific challenges, such as open ocean loading zones in Port Orford, were also highlighted as factors that need to be taken into account.

Derelict Gear (slides 8-13 of the [meeting presentation](#))

ODFW provided an overview of Oregon's current derelict gear retrieval efforts, including in-season allowances, the Oregon Dungeness Crab Commission's (ODCC) late-season recovery program, ODFW's post-season program, and additional work led by the Oregon Coast Crab Association (OCCA). The agency reviewed trends in logbook-reported pot loss vs. total pots recovered, noting that over the past decade recovery rates have rarely reached 50 percent with the acknowledgement that these estimates are based on self-reporting. Participation in retrieval programs varies by year, with vessel involvement and pot numbers generally higher in the post-season program, while the ODCC's late-season program remains capped. ODFW also examined buoy tags from pots recovered through the post-season program and found that, for the last six years, the majority carried only main-season tags, indicating that many pots remained in the water throughout the late season.

The update included results from the ODCC's survey exploring a fee-and-reward concept for gear recovery, which received 29 responses. Fishermen raised concerns about the current post-season program, including a "finders, keepers" mentality and legal ambiguity around gear theft, the program not beginning until after the season, the lack of limits on retrieval fees, limited incentives to recover low-value gear, and insufficient opportunities for owners to reclaim gear. Respondents also expressed reservations about the fee-and-reward concept itself, citing the inability of some fishermen to pay, high tag-loss rates, and the belief that purchasing recovered gear should remain at the owner's discretion, especially since buy-back options already exist.

To conclude, ODFW invited Cari Brandberg to explain how OCCA's Gear Recovery and Identification Program (GRIP) operates. Fishermen can participate by registering gear at the end of the season so others know it can be safely retrieved, reporting recovered gear with photos and location details, and reporting derelict gear observed at sea with coordinates and identifying information. All information is submitted through a QR-linked webpage, creating a shared, transparent system that supports coordinated recovery and improves awareness of derelict gear across the fleet.

Derelict gear cleanup was one of the most widely supported topics. Fishermen described personal initiatives such as offering rewards for pot recovery and stressed that all gear left in the ocean is ultimately the fleet's collective responsibility. ODFW and industry partners discussed development of an application to streamline reporting and gear identification, coordination with OSP, and ongoing work to address property law challenges. Participants cited frustrations with gear sitting unclaimed for months and emphasized the need for clear timelines for retrieval. Fishermen praised Washington's early season derelict gear program, noting that it retrieves far

more pots than Oregon's due to its earlier start. Many expressed strong interest in adopting a similar earlier recovery window in Oregon, though ODFW explained that legislative limitations currently prevent changes to the authorized post-season retrieval period. Several fishermen encouraged greater publicity around derelict gear cleanup as a way to highlight the fleet's proactive efforts.

Five-year Risk Reduction Measures Evaluation (slides 15-23 of the [meeting presentation](#))

ODFW shared plans to bring a five-year evaluation of key entanglement risk reduction measures to the OFWC in August 2026. The evaluation will assess confirmed entanglements, entanglement risk reduction, fishery impacts, and compliance information. ODFW emphasized that this is a partial snapshot and invited ODCAC input on additional metrics to include.

Preliminary findings show that confirmed entanglements attributed to Oregon crab gear increased from seven cases during the eight years prior to implementation of measures (2013–2020) to thirteen cases post-implementation (2021–2025), with most involving humpback whales. ODFW noted that improved reporting, a growing humpback population, and shifting ocean conditions likely contribute to this increase. Entanglements now occur across a wider range of months and are more frequently documented in Oregon waters, and several recent cases appear to involve derelict gear. None of the post-implementation cases involved late-season tags, suggesting most have originated with gear set outside the May–August period targeted by the late-season measures.

On risk reduction performance, late-season line-days (a proxy for entanglement risk) have declined by nearly 25 percent on average since implementation of measures, with four of the five post-implementation seasons showing reductions of 26–41 percent. The only exception was 2022–23, when unusually high crab abundance increased fishing effort resulting in higher late-season line-days.

Fishery impact metrics show little change in overall participation or landings. Early season variability appears tied to differences in season opening structure rather than the risk reduction measures. Late-season participation remains consistent with pre-implementation levels. Landings have generally been higher post-implementation, with small decreases in July and August, and overall variability appears driven by crab abundance and price rather than regulatory measures. ODFW plans to further analyze impacts to participation, landings, and value by port, pot limit tier, and vessel length to explore any differential impacts to certain segments of the fleet.

ODFW's preliminary assessment concludes that entanglement rates have risen even as late-season risk has decreased, that most entanglements in recent years appear to have originated outside of the late-season window, and that overall fishery-wide impacts remain minimal. Compliance has generally been strong, though enforcing tag requirements is challenging, and non-compliance increased during the temporary shift in the late-season start date during the 2025-26 season.

The presentation closed with request for feedback on what additional metrics should be included in the five-year evaluation and what long- or short-term regulatory changes should be considered. ODFW also welcomed ideas for non-regulatory approaches, such as voluntary measures or research needs, while noting that the immediate focus is on what may be brought to the OFWC in August.

ODCAC members discussed variability in recent annual data and the importance of interpreting trends carefully, especially if anomalous years such as 2023 are removed. They noted that revenue trends may be more meaningful than raw poundage. Participants asked about late-season entanglements, the possibility of re-examining a late-season endorsement, and whether late-season pots contribute disproportionately to entanglement risk. ODFW explained that a late-season limited entry program was discussed years ago and a control date was adopted in 2019, but there hasn't been strong support for developing a late-season limited entry program to date, and that the lack of late-season buoy tags on gear involved in entanglements indicates late-season limited entry would do little to minimize entanglements. Fishermen commented that derelict gear appears to play a significant role and cautioned against overreacting to a small number of entanglements. They emphasized the importance of tracking and removing gear promptly after the main season and urged the industry to stay unified rather than dividing main-season and late-season participants. Some fishermen argued that whales may be more alert to gear during the early season when more gear is in the water. Participants stressed the need for improved pot tracking, faster gear removal after the main season, and preventing finger pointing between fisheries sectors.

Vessel Monitoring

(slides 24-26 of the [meeting presentation](#))

ODFW presented an overview of the proposed electronic monitoring (EM) system for the Oregon commercial Dungeness crab fishery, clarifying that this system tracks vessel location and hydraulic pressure to document pot-setting and hauling, rather than using cameras. Data would be transmitted to a service provider and then shared with PSMFC and ODFW for management and enforcement. Washington and California already require similar systems, and ODFW plans to propose that Oregon vessels adopt EM by December 1, 2026, with electronic logbooks remaining voluntary until December 1, 2030. Oregon's requirements would include a one-minute VMS ping rate and a ten-second hydraulic sensor ping rate, meaning federal satellite-based VMS units would likely not meet state specifications. Oregon's system would instead transmit data when vessels return to cellular range, reducing costs.

ODFW explained that EM is needed to improve data quality, reduce the workload associated with processing paper logbooks, and address compliance and completeness issues that lead to backlogged data. As part of its CP, the agency has been developing an integrated electronic logbook and tracking system to provide more precise and timely information on fishing effort, catch, and location. Since 2022, ODFW has partnered with Harbor Light Software to pilot this system, with 20 vessels participating; the pilot program will conclude this summer. Two tested VMS units—Viatrix's Boat Command and Archipelago's FishVue LIME—are currently known meet Oregon's proposed requirements, though other units may qualify if they meet specifications.

The presentation also summarized expected costs for units, sensors, and subscriptions, noting that while cost is a drawback, ODFW has secured funding for a reimbursement or purchase-assistance program to offset most, if not all, initial equipment costs. ODFW highlighted several benefits of EM, including integration with their electronic logbook application that would reduce recordkeeping burdens, improved derelict gear tracking, more timely data for assessing entanglement risk, the ability to develop more targeted conservation measures, and stronger enforcement of pot theft, crab theft, fair-start rules, closed areas, and pot limits.

Questions about EM and electronic logbooks prompted discussion about data needs vs. operational burdens. Several fishermen described the current e-logbook application as cumbersome and difficult to use, raising safety concerns during high workload periods such as season opening. ODFW is preparing a streamlined update and explained the importance of pot counts and spatially-explicit effort data for verifying gear levels and understanding entanglement risk. Fishermen emphasized that the logbook system must become user friendly enough that the fleet adopts it voluntarily before any mandated use. Some participants noted that EM may not eliminate the need for hold inspections, especially during pre-soak, and raised questions about how participation in other fisheries and barging interact with monitoring requirements, especially hydraulic sensors. ODFW acknowledged these challenges and indicated that requirements may need adjustment if the tool is not ready in time.

Pop-up and Longline Experimental Fishing Gear Permit Program Development

(slides 27-29 of the [meeting presentation](#))

ODFW provided an update on plans for an experimental fishing gear permit program to test pop-up and longline gear in Oregon waters. The goal of the program is to evaluate these gear types both individually and in combination, and collect data needed to determine whether broader authorization could be considered in specific times and areas. The testing will also help assess potential enforcement challenges, gear conflict issues, and operational considerations. Rulemaking to establish the program is planned for consideration at the August 2026 OFWC meeting, with experimental permit issuance anticipated for spring 2027.

Staff reviewed the basics of pop-up gear systems, which rely on either acoustic or timed releases. Acoustic systems are often paired with longline configurations, while timed release systems may be suitable for single pot use. All participating vessels would be required to use virtual gear marking, complete NMFS Level 1 whale entanglement response training, and complete gear use and location tracking training through either the manufacturer or a third-party provider.

ODFW outlined the types of information and data that would be collected during the trials, including gear efficiency and reliability, gear movement, and performance across different configurations—such as number of pots, strings, or vertical lines, and the use of sinking, floating, or neutral groundline. This information will help inform future management decisions and evaluate whether broader authorization of pop-up or longline gear is feasible.

ODFW also discussed proposed eligibility criteria for permit holders, including no civil or criminal fishery-law violations within a specified number of years, no convictions for crab or pot theft within a similar timeframe, and no violations of experimental fishing permit terms and conditions.

The agency requested ODCAC feedback on potential incentives to encourage participation, such as access to areas otherwise closed due to entanglement risk, restoration of reduced pot limits, or access to gear at no or reduced cost through a “gear library”. Funding for a gear library has not been identified but is something that ODFW could pursue if there was support for it.

The discussion on experimental gear focused on pop-up systems and longline configurations. ODFW explained that these gear types are intended as tools in case future entanglement triggers require area or depth closures and that small scale testing is needed so the agency and enforcement can understand how to manage such gear. Many fishermen expressed strong concerns about feasibility, safety, fleetwide applicability, and the potential creation of a “fishery within a fishery.” Participants questioned limiting the number of permits and urged that, if testing proceeds, it should avoid regulatory incentives that favor particular products or manufacturers. Several argued that the fleet already knows the risks and limitations of longlining and that resources should instead go toward buoy tracking and expanding derelict gear efforts. ODFW clarified that pop-up gear testing was not part of an agreement tied to the petition but rather an ongoing area of exploration. Fishermen stressed that any solution must work for the entire fleet and that safety concerns raised by fishermen nationwide should not be dismissed.

Public Comment

ODFW staff provided time for public comments. Comments reinforced the need to focus testing on pop-up systems rather than longlining, invest in buoy trackers, and move derelict gear efforts earlier in the year when legally possible. Participants reflected on the complexity of these issues and noted that meaningful progress requires consistent dialogue among fishermen, scientists, and managers. ODFW closed by emphasizing the importance of public input and the intent to carry these perspectives into future public processes.