

Meeting Summary:

Discussion between the ODFW / Shellfish Program and the Oregon Commercial Sea Urchin Industry

Port Orford, OR / Thu 3 Dec 2015

The ODFW / Shellfish Program (S. Rumrill & S. Groth) held an open meeting with representatives from the Oregon commercial sea urchin fishery in Port Orford, OR on Thursday, December 3rd, 2015. The meeting was attended by six members from the commercial industry, including four long-term divers who are very active in the harvests, one diver who holds a qualified permit that is renewed annually, and one diver that has just made the minimum landings. The participants at the meeting were broadly representative of the commercial sea urchin fishery in Oregon.

ODFW Shellfish Biologist Scott Groth delivered a presentation to describe the historic activities and landings of red sea urchins in Oregon, to identify the current challenges posed by decreasing urchin densities and low rates of recruitment, and to offer several different alternatives to improve management of the commercial fishery. The group held an active discussion about the trends in fishery landings and declines in the level of active permit holders, and they explored possible steps to help ensure that the urchin populations and commercial fishery can remain viable into the future.

Several topics were discussed as options for improved management:

1. Reduce the Number of Sea Urchin Permits
 - a. Based on the historic data, the number of active permits that can be sustained by the urchin stock is clearly lower than the existing system (currently 30 permits including active and inactive)
 - b. Consensus was reached that 12 permits is a good number given current condition of the urchin stocks (* recommended by ODFW and commercial urchin fishery)
 - c. The number of Sea Urchin Permits should be reduced from 30 to 12 by the process of attrition (currently there are 15 active permits)
2. Fishing Depth
 - a. The group discussed the option to restrict urchin harvests to shallow depths (i.e., < 60 ft) to provide a refuge in deep water
 - b. Industry representatives resisted a restriction on maximum depth due to problems with enforcement and anticipated burdens with dive records
 - c. Consensus was reached that use of enriched air or mixed gas diving should be prohibited (* recommended by ODFW and commercial urchin fishery)
 - i. Commercial divers are concerned that increased time underwater at mid depths (50-70) could potentially improve efficiency and affect ability to harvest the "crawl-in" urchins that have sustained the fishery in modern times
 - ii. Commercial divers are also concerned that fishery practices could change in the future and competition could drive divers into deeper water for longer periods of time

3. Commercial Harvest of California Sea Cucumbers

- a. Commercial harvest of CA sea cucumbers has been intermittent in Oregon, and the vast majority of sea cucumbers have been landed by commercial sea urchin divers
- b. The harvest of CA sea cucumbers is currently robust in California and Washington, and it is likely that interest in harvests will increase in Oregon in the near future
- c. Consensus was reached that commercial harvest of CA sea cucumbers should be included in the Sea Urchin Permit system which will place harvest into a limited-entry fishery and remove it from an open-access fishery (* recommended by ODFW and commercial urchin fishery)
- d. Commercial urchin divers were in agreement to administer the CA sea cucumber fishery in a manner similar to the fishery for purple sea urchins (i.e., conduct surveys and collect biological data; designate harvest areas on an experimental basis)

Other housekeeping items were also discussed and relegated to a second priority for further discussion and potential management action (i.e., rules regarding the large font size for vessel identification numbers letters may no longer be necessary).

ODFW Staff member Steve Rumrill described the process and timeline for bringing the potential management changes before the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission. Because the OFWC took action in 2014 to suspend the lottery for new Sea Urchin Permits for a period of two years, the time has come to bring management of the Oregon urchin fishery back to the commission in the spring or early summer of 2016. Potential target dates occur in March and April of 2016.