

Crabbing ban challenges coastal restaurants

NATALIE JACEWICZ 12:44 p.m. PST November 19, 2015



(Photo: Natalie Jacewicz/For The Californian)

The wave of toxic crabs off the California coast will hit the fishing industry especially hard, but for many Californians, the sting will come when they sit down to peruse restaurant menus.

As the holidays approach, restaurateurs are scrambling to satisfy a crab-crazed public, and the state's foodies may reevaluate just how much they value a freshly cracked crab dipped in butter.

"The delay of crab season will certainly reduce the availability of crab to local restaurants and possibly increase the market price of crab," the California Restaurant Association advises.

State officials have instated a ban on California crabbing just as the recreational Dungeness crab season was slated to begin, with commercial crabbing fast on its heels. The prohibition stems from tiny algae plants that have flourished in the summer's warm waters and flooded the ocean with toxic domoic acid, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association. Slews of sea creatures, including crabs, have eaten contaminated food and have become grown toxic themselves.

Phil DiGirolamo of Phil's Fish Market in Moss Landing said the crab scourge would challenge business as usual. Right now, DiGirolamo offers customers armies of Dungeness crabs. Bright red stacks of them lie on shaved ice in storefront displays, and blue-gray, live crabs rest in oversized kitchen tubs. Two customers said they'd driven over three hours from Bakersfield for the restaurant and market's seafood cornucopia.

"We brought crab in from Canada," DiGirolamo said. "We'll see the [ban's] effect when we get closer to Thanksgiving, because that's a big week for crab."

Even without holiday demand, he said, he sells 100 to 200 pounds of crab a day.

But customers must shell out more cash than usual. Last year's prices per pound ran well under 10 dollars, according to DiGirolamo. Now, a pound of fresh crab commands \$12.95.

Other restaurants have stopped offering Dungeness crab altogether. Half Moon Bay's Princeton Seafood Company, for instance, has scuttled holiday crab orders because of fishing restrictions.

Californian seafood lovers who prize Dungeness crabs are reluctant to switch to other forms. DiGirolamo said he finds blue crabs too small and Alaskan crabmeat too stringy.

"Plus, being in California, we get Dungeness fresh," he said.

Andy Schaffter traps crab off California's coast, though he's currently focusing on squid. He explained how he gives markets and restaurants the crab that customers love.

First, Schaffter pulls trapping pots onto a boat and examines each crab. With a tight hold on two hind legs, he pinches the crab's limbs for the firmness that indicates fresh, luscious meat. Feeble crabs, along with small ones, get tossed back into the ocean to crawl another day.

Now, no one is crabbing, and "it could be two years," Schaffter said, before crabbing returns to normal and customers see lower prices.

"When people finally get back to work," crabbers are "going to want that price," he said, referring to elevated crab prices.

Meanwhile, DiGirolamo pegs his hopes on Washington state's future crab yields.

"We're crossing our fingers," he said.

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