Commission approves new policy for Puget Sound crab fisheries

Local News

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Olympia, WA - The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission today approved changes in its policy for managing Dungeness crab in Puget Sound that could increase sport crabbers’ annual catch by 40 percent. The new policy, adopted on a voice vote, eliminates current catch quotas for the popular sport fishery and instead establishes a fixed season for recreational crab fishing in Puget Sound. Once adopted as a state regulation, that model will allow sport crabbers to fish for Dungeness crab five days a week – including weekends – from July through Labor Day, with a five-crab daily limit. A winter season would run seven days a week from October through December. Current regulations limit the summer sport crabbing season in most of Puget Sound to four days per week, including Saturdays but not Sundays.

“This has been coming for a long time,” said Miranda Wecker, who chairs the nine-member commission that sets policy for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). “The number of sport crabbers has grown dramatically in recent years, and Puget Sound is – by far – the most popular place to fish.” Approximately 220,000 people purchased license endorsements to fish for Dungeness crab in Puget Sound this year, said Rich Childers, WDFW Puget Sound shellfish manager. Five years ago, just 160,000 people were licensed to fish for crab in the Sound. The State Auditor’s Office, in a report issued earlier this year, found that the state’s policy for allocating the harvest would not accommodate the continued growth in the number of Puget Sound sport crabbers. The commission’s action to expand fishing opportunities for sport crabbers will likely reduce the amount of Dungeness crab available for harvest by the state-managed commercial fishery in the Sound. Commercial fishers, who currently account for approximately 67 percent of the crab caught by non-tribal fishers, could see their share drop to 55 percent under the new policy, Childers said. Tribal fisheries are not affected by the new policy, although all Dungeness crab fisheries in Puget Sound are managed under a single quota that reflects shared conservation goals. Now that the new policy has been adopted, the commission must still officially change state fishing regulations for it to affect future fishing seasons. The commission is scheduled to hold public hearings on those rules in December and consider final adoption in February. In approving the new policy, commissioners emphasized the importance of vigilant enforcement strategies, public information and annual reporting by WDFW to ensure that it meets its statutory obligation to conduct “orderly fisheries.” To support those efforts, the commission authorized WDFW to seek legislative approval to increase fees on recreational license endorsements for Puget Sound crabbing. With the commission’s approval, WDFW will seek to increase the annual crab endorsement fee, currently $3, to $7.50. For temporary licenses, the endorsement would increase from $1 to $3. On the second day of its two-day meeting is Olympia, the commission has scheduled public hearing to discuss possible restrictions on the use of lead fishing tackle at 13 lakes with nesting loons. As part of that discussion, the commission will review the findings of a WDFW advisory group established to assess scientific studies on risks posed to loons that ingest lead fishing tackle and recommend ways to minimize those risks. The commission will continue to accept written comments on banning the use of lead weights on the 13 lakes through Nov. 19. Comments may be

submitted to WDFW Rules Coordinator Lori Preuss at Lori.Preuss@dfw.wa.gov or 600 Capitol Way N., Olympia, WA, 98501. The commission will convene for the second day of its meeting at 9 a.m. Oct. 2 on the first floor of the Natural Resources Building in Olympia at 1111 Washington St. S.E. A complete agenda for the meeting is available on the WDFW website at http://wdfw.wa.gov/commission/meetings/2010/.