

Gear retrieval project helps the environment while saving money

To Oregon crabbers, an ambitious project to find and retrieve gear lost off the Oregon coast isn't just a question of helping to clean up an increasingly cluttered sea floor. It also makes good economic sense.

With new restrictions on how many pots each crabber can put in the water—and with each pot worth upwards of \$100—recovering lost gear so it can be repaired and put back into service seems like a pretty good idea. But most fishermen don't have the gear—or the time—to go looking for their own lost traps.

Prompted by a request from Scott McMullen, chair of the Oregon Fishermen's Cable Committee (OFCC) and himself a longtime commercial fisherman, Oregon Sea Grant helped write an application for a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) grant to design and test new ways of finding and retrieving gear, and then helped coordinate a diverse group of fishermen, regulators, and agencies to put the project in action.



Oregon Sea Grant Extension/Paul Heikkila photo

Tom Nowlin, skipper of the *F/V Apache*, reeling up a derelict crab pot. Sea Grant Extension's gear retrieval project recovered dozens of such pots and a variety of other fishing gear.

pots that leave Oregon ports each year fail to return home with the fleet. They may break free in rough seas, get cut by the propellers of passing vessels, get tangled up with seaweed, or get snarled with other, older derelict gear.

Whatever the cause, the lost gear is one reason the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission

The grant was one of several NOAA has disbursed around the U.S. in an effort to reduce marine debris, which the agency says is an historical problem that continues to grow. Marine debris injures and kills marine mammals, interferes with navigation safety, has adverse economic impacts to shipping and coastal industries, and can pose a threat to marine animals and human health. Derelict fishing gear is just one part of the problem—but it's considered significant enough that the agency has set aside specific grant funds for projects that address it.

It's estimated that as many as 10 percent of commercial crab

commission decided to reduce the number of permitted crab pots in the winter 2006–07 season to 150,000, just three-fourths the number permitted the previous year—and a maximum of 500 pots per boat, compared with the 1,000 some boats carried before the rule change.

McMullen's original plan, brought to a Sea Grant Extension meeting in 2005, was to seek a grant to recover three trawl nets sacrificed to undersea cables—the OFCC's main interest. But in early organizational meetings, "it became clear that the biggest marine debris problem off our coast was crab pots," recalls Paul Heikkila, the Coos County Sea Grant



Extension agent who, with his counterpart Steve Theberge from Astoria, worked with McMullen in coordinating the project.

It didn't take long to get others involved. The Oregon Crab Commission stepped in with matching funds to help pay fishing vessels and their crews to do the retrieval work. Sea Grant's Port Liaison Project helped find boats and owners willing to take part in the project and found fishermen to put together grappling gear and unload derelict pots and locate the owners of the lost pots.

Two boats, whose crews were experienced both in crabbing and trawling, were selected to grapple for lost gear, the *F/V Cape St. James* out of Warrenton, skippered by Scott Smotherman, and the *F/V Apache* out of Charleston, skippered by Tom Nowlin. Industry joined in, too: Tyco Telecommunications, which installs and maintains undersea communications cables, and Englund Marine, which helped transport the retrieval gear between Astoria and Charleston. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Oregon State Police helped work out the legal aspects of retrieving lost gear after the offshore fishing season had closed.

Despite fall weather delays, the 2006 gear retrieval test was a resounding success. Sailing out of Warrenton, the *F/V Cape St. James* hauled in two loads total-

ing more than 40 pots. Sailing two days later out of Charleston, the *F/V Apache* managed to snare 19 crab pots—and 600 feet of abandoned trawl cable. Both boats also snagged old ropes, fishing hooks, and segments of fishing net.

The fishermen got much of the credit for the project's success; not only did their skippers have a good idea where to find lost gear, but they were willing to improvise to haul it up. When the

disintegrate quickly if the pot is lost, worked just as planned. "We were surprised at how few crabs we brought up," Theberge said. "There was only one dead crab in all those pots and it was in the only pot that for some reason did not have a weak link. The gear seems to be working the way it's supposed to and we didn't see ghost fishing going on."

And most of the pots still bore identification tags, allowing them to be returned to their owners. "Even when they're a little beat up, this is still pretty valuable stuff," said Heikkila. "When people can get their gear back, they're pretty happy."

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trawl cable snagged by the *Apache* proved difficult to maneuver, Heikkila recalled, Nowlin secured it to his boat with a length of chain, removed the shackle from his trawl door, and then wound all 600 feet up onto his trawl wench.

Theberge, meanwhile, oversaw biological monitoring. On board the vessels, he looked for evidence of ghost fishing, and kept track of live and dead animals and the condition of the traps. Live animals were counted and released. Waiting at dockside when the boats came back to port were local high school and university students, who inventoried the recovered gear for signs of attached marine life, living or dead.

The good news: crab pots designed with "weak links" made of cotton twine, intended to

The test was encouraging enough that many of the same players hoped to collaborate on further grant applications to help refine retrieval techniques. At the same time, efforts were in the works to provide incentives for fishermen and their boats to take part. Heikkila said the Crab Commission hoped to get state law changed to establish a bounty program whereby crabbers would have to contribute money to a pool that would help pay the bill for regular gear retrieval. Also in the works: a lost-pot registry where commercial and sport fishermen could report the location of crab buoys they encounter so the stray gear could be retrieved and returned to its owners.

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