

Early gear-retrieval project helps secure stimulus funds

Up to 10 percent of commercial crab pots that leave Oregon ports each year fail to return home with the fleet, and replacing a pot can cost \$140.

In 2007 a pilot project funded by Oregon Sea Grant demonstrated that it is not only possible but profitable to retrieve lost crab pots. That project, which involved the close collaboration of scientists, fishermen, and researchers, helped lay the groundwork for a \$699,000 NOAA grant in 2009. The grant is paying commercial fishermen to clean up 180 metric tons of abandoned gear off the Oregon coast.

The new effort, awarded as part of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, is expected to charter about 10 boats to bring in several thousand lost crab pots, as well as any other stray gear the fishermen run across.

“There is excitement among the crab fleet,” said Jeff Feldner of Oregon Sea Grant (OSG). “This is big money for them. The project employs people in the off-season and provides support to unemployed fishermen.”

The new project is expected to create more than two dozen jobs. It will involve about 140 vessel charter day trips, split among several boats in three regions of the Oregon coast, and about 80 hours of chartered plane flights to locate and retrieve lost gear.

Boats will bid to participate in the program, which will reimburse participants for fuel, insurance, and other at-sea costs. Once the pots are recovered, they will be dropped in ports for the original owners to pick up.



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The project will also employ port liaisons to coordinate recovery trips, collect data, and arrange gear drop-offs. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) plans to model the port liaison program after a successful OSG program that has hired knowledgeable, unemployed commercial fishermen to assist in marine research and related activities.

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NOAA has twice set aside specific grant funds for projects that address it.

It's estimated that up to 10 percent of commercial crab 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 snagged on other, older derelict gear.

Whatever the cause, the lost gear is one reason the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission decided to reduce the number of permitted crab pots in the winter 2006–07 season to 150,000—three-fourths the number permitted the previous year—and a maximum of 500 pots per boat.

OSG's original gear-retrieval pilot was prompted by a request from Scott McMullen, chair of the Oregon Fishermen's Cable Committee (OFCC) and himself a longtime commercial fisherman. OSG and ODFW helped McMullen write an application for a 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 into action.

McMullen's original plan 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," recalled Paul Heikkila, Coos County's Sea Grant agent, now retired. Heikkila and Steve Theberge, his counterpart in Astoria, worked with McMullen to coordinate the pilot 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. OSG's Port Liaison Project and ODFW 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—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—were selected to grapple for lost gear. They were joined by Tyco Telecommunications, which installs and maintains undersea

communications cables, and Englund Marine, which helped transport the retrieval gear between Astoria and Charleston. ODFW 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 totaling 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 received 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. Heikkila recalls that when the trawl cable snagged by the Apache proved difficult to maneuver, 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 (who has since left Sea Grant) and ODFW fisheries observers oversaw biological monitoring. On board the vessels, they 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



Captain Dave Hazen (F/V Glass Slipper) examines a stack of retrieved crab pots.

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 made with weak links or "rotten cotton" (cotton twine)—designed to disintegrate quickly if the pot were lost—worked just as planned. 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."

Crab fishermen are eager to participate in the 2009 program. ODFW has received many calls from fishermen wanting to sign up for the effort.

"Fishermen have an enormous amount of knowledge," said Feldner. "Very frequently the really innovative ideas come from fishermen. Sea Grant's big advantage is it meets the need to connect with local knowledge."

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