

## **For local fishing fleet, something has got to give: Growing pains in Bay Area waters amid a slurry of regulations**

Captain Mike Phillips typically meets his deckhands at Pier 45 shortly after midnight. Hours before the sun comes up, the crew could already be miles off the shores of San Francisco. The rest of the day's work pulling crab traps could stretch up to 20 hours.

It's hard, honest work, and there's nothing else he'd rather do.

But now, just over one month after the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) Marine Region instituted a two-month early May 1 closure of the Bay Area's Dungeness crab fishery, Phillips is anchored. The season is closed to prevent [humpback whale entanglement](#) with crab lines.

Typically bustling with the hubbub of the day's freshest catches, today, the Fisherman's Wharf fleet is practically deserted of all commercial noise.

The local fleet was even told to expect more closures, more often—that was, until President Trump announced an [executive order](#) on April 17 directing regional fisheries management councils to remove “burden” regulations on American fishermen.

When the weather is right and prices are high, a boat of Phillips' size could make up to \$50,000 in one day. Now he can't afford to cover the critical repairs his boat needs to stay in business. In the off-season, he's spending the quieter mornings by repurposing old supplies to patch over cracks on his boat, 'Miss Alison'.

“I feel like we were targeted,” Phillips said, shaking his head. “We're low-hanging fruit.”

### **High risk with little guarantee**

California maintains several of the most regulated fisheries in the United States. The licenses to fish some of these species, such as Dungeness crab and king salmon, can be extremely valuable.

Captain John Barnett of 'The Amigo' has been fishing for twenty years and is semi-retired. Last year, he sold his vessel's 55-foot, 400-pot Dungeness crab license for \$150,000.

There's a high overhead to become an operating vessel. A comfortable ship could cost up to half a million dollars. A single trap could be up to \$400. Fishing line, buoys, and trap tags pile on the costs. Many take out hefty loans to cover it.

Even after becoming sea-ready, captains are expected to follow a long list of various regulations on season length, depth constraints, and gear reduction. This season, the CDFW mandated that each license holder use only 50 percent of their crab traps.

Thinking about the regulative pressure he's under, Barnett doesn't hide his frustration.

"There's just nothing to fish with," Barnett said.

Ryan Bartling, Senior Environmental Scientist Supervisor at CDFW Marine Region, knows that the recent changes for crab are unpopular on the wharf.

"It's really hard because they do feel like it's coming from all directions," Bartling said.

The state of things doesn't have to be so bleak. According to Bartling, "90 percent to 95 percent of the crab is landed in the first eight weeks," so even if there are more frequent season closures, the CDFW doesn't expect catastrophe for the fleet.

Bartling is hopeful about striking a balance. "Can the protection of endangered species and state fisheries exist? I think the answer is yes," he said.

### **Too little, too late from Washington**

The executive order on 'Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness' is an updated reinstatement of a similar [2020](#) Trump order. It aims to promote the harvest of seafood by unburdening commercial fleets from "costly and inefficient regulation."

However, most regulations affecting the local fleet are coming from the state, not the federal government. The crackdown started in 2020 after CDFW began to enforce against entanglement risk for endangered species, including humpback whales, blue whales, and leatherback sea turtles.

Regarding Trump's plan to lift burdensome regulations, Barnett responds grimly: "He can't."

Not all captains agree that it's even the right solution.

Captain Sarah Bates of 'The Bounty' said that while a lot of the state policies affecting her king salmon business are "misinformed" on "bad science," the fact is that "most of those fishing regulations are designed to make our fisheries sustainable in the long term."

"And so if you got rid of all the regulations," Bates said, "that's stupid."

Instead of sweeping directives, most of the fleet would rather see a sturdier middle ground. Barnett said that he identifies as an "environmentalist," but feels that the state exaggerates the impact of entanglements.

"Is it dead on the beach, wrapped in crab gear? Most of the whales that are dead on the beach are hit by ships," Barnett took pause. "Nobody's stopped shopping at Amazon."

While Phillips said that he believes Dungeness crab season is "unjustly closed," he still would like the state to "keep it regulated."

"But open it up a little bit so Americans can have American fish again," Phillips said.

### **Old hardships, new wounds**

Gordon Drysdale is the Culinary Director at Scoma's, an iconic Pier 47 Italian restaurant boasting a "[pier-to-plate menu](#)." But in the last decade, Drysdale said it has become "immeasurably" more difficult to source local seafood.

That's why he has turned to frozen or farmed options from Washington, British Columbia, and New Zealand. He doesn't believe that it makes a difference to the customer once it's on the plate.

"If people are coming here," Drysdale said, "they expect to get crab."

Bates finds that attitude frustrating, saying, "They can do better."

If local restaurants don't do their part to support the fleet, she said, they won't "have their main selling point, and they're out of business."

Amidst all the challenges, Phillips is still hopeful for what Trump might accomplish with the renewed attention on domestic fisheries. Looking off with a cigarette between his fingers, Phillips said that he's proud of his four-decade-long career on the wharf.

"I've bought a nice house, I drive a two-year-old truck," he said. "I've got Harleys, I've got hot rods. I mean, it was really good."

Still, if regulations on the fleet don't ease up anytime soon, Phillips has to consider his next move. He gestures to the fresh coat of white paint on Miss Alison's bow.

"Well, boat's for sale," he said.