

State and Lummi tribe crack down on illegal crab sales

By JOHN STARK

THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

January 9, 2014

BELLINGHAM - After a two-year investigation, law officers from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and Lummi Nation Natural Resources are cracking down on an extensive black market in Dungeness crab.

Mike Cenci, deputy chief of marine operations at WDFW, said state and tribal officers served search warrants at a number of locations in Whatcom, King and Snohomish counties on Monday, Jan. 6. So far the investigation has not resulted in arrests, but Cenci said a Whatcom County tribal fisherman's vessel and vehicle were confiscated after investigating officers found him carrying 63 undersized crab. Another 80 were found when a warrant was served at his home.

Officers also used a warrant to search a licensed non-Indian fish buyer's home and business in Whatcom County, Cenci said, declining to give specifics until charges are filed.

Those charges may involve a variety of fisheries law violations:

- keeping crab smaller than the legal 6 1/4-inch size.
- failing to keep and submit records of crab catches and crab sales.
- buying and selling crab without a license.

Those violations could be prosecuted as felonies if the value of the crab involved exceeds \$250, Cenci said.

Investigators believe that the licensed fish buyer provided bootleg crab to five restaurants and five nail salons in the three-county area. Nail salon proprietors resold the fish to others.

"If you're buying crab or any kind of seafood out of a nail salon, you can bet that it's not legal," Cenci said.

The state and the sovereign treaty Indian tribes cooperate in managing a closely controlled fishery in the valuable crustaceans. Both fishermen and licensed fish buyers are supposed to submit regular reports to regulators. Those reports enable fisheries managers to properly divide the catch between three groups: tribal and non-tribal commercial fishermen and recreational crabbers.

More important, the catch records are supposed to enable regulators to determine when it is time to curtail the harvest to prevent overfishing.

"Those documents provide critical information to our resource managers to learn what's being taken out of the ecosystem," Cenci said.

The legal size limit also helps preserve the crab population by giving crabs a chance to reproduce before they end up on a dinner plate.

The black market gives rogue businesses an edge over competitors who pay more to obey the law, Cenci said.

He described the problem as "rampant," and added, "This represents the tip of the iceberg."

Reach John Stark at 360-715-2274 or john.stark@bellinghamherald.com . Read the Politics Blog at bellinghamherald.com/politics-blog or get updates on Twitter at @bhampolitics.

Read more here: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/2014/01/09/3412586/state-and-lummi-tribe-crack-down.html#storylink=cpy>