

Derelict Shellfish Gear

2024 Report to the Legislature



Washington
Department of
**FISH &
WILDLIFE**

December 2024



State of Washington
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

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December 18, 2024

The Honorable Sharon Shewmake
Chair, Senate Agriculture, Water,
Natural Resources, and Parks
213 John A. Cherberg Building
Post Office Box 40442
Olympia, WA 98504-0442

The Honorable Kristine Reeves
Chair, House Agriculture and
Natural Resources
132E Legislative Building
Post Office Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600

Dear Chairs,

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) is required to submit a report to the legislature regarding the removal and disposal of derelict shellfish gear, including the allocation of funds for this purpose received through the sale of Dungeness Crab endorsements. Requirements for the report to the legislature are outlined in RCW 77.32.430, Section 5(a):

The attached report covers background on the issue and a summary of the Department's activities and expenditures for 2024. The report also summarizes the work effort dedicated to an unfunded proviso in the Department's 2023-25 operating budget to prioritize the removal of derelict and abandoned crab pot gear in the North Hood Canal.

If you have any questions regarding this report, please contact our Legislative Director Melena Thompson at (564) 791-2755.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kelly Susewind".

Kelly Susewind
Director

Derelict Shellfish Gear

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Author

Aaron Dufault, Puget Sound Shellfish Manager, WDFW

Cover photo by WDFW Enforcement.

Request this information in an alternative format or language at wdfw.wa.gov/accessibility/requests-accommodation, 833-885-1012, TTY (711), or CivilRightsTeam@dfw.wa.gov.

Acknowledging the Indigenous People of the Pacific Northwest

Since time immemorial, Indigenous People have lived in the Pacific Northwest and hunted, fished, and gathered natural resources, traditional foods, and medicinal plants to support their diverse cultures. They were the original occupants and stewards of this land that all Washingtonians enjoy today.

The very survival of the Pacific Northwest Tribes is a testament of resiliency of what they have endured and continue to endure throughout generations on this landscape. Through many historical encounters of massacre, renunciation of religious freedom, systemic racism, cultural assimilation of native children through institutional residential schools, and the fight for their inherent rights and liberties, they have prevailed. Throughout this painful history brought by colonization, abrogated treaties, infringement of civil rights, and the salmon protests of the 1960s, the Northwest Tribes and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) have founded a commitment of respect, unity, and alliance informed by the realities of the past.

Today, tribal governments and WDFW work collaboratively to conserve and manage aquatic and terrestrial resources statewide and practice sound science to guide management decisions. The Tribes and WDFW work together to ensure the sustainability of fish, wildlife, ecosystems, and culture for the next seven generations and beyond.

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Background

Abandoned, lost, or discarded crab fishing pots in Puget Sound waters pose a threat to sea life and can degrade marine habitats. These lost crab pots, estimated at 12,000 a year, can continue to catch and kill crab and other marine life, depleting key resources important to the Puget Sound ecosystem and the region's economy.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), tribal co-managers, and other organizations removing this derelict shellfish gear from Puget Sound. A portion of the funds WDFW received from Puget Sound Dungeness Crab Endorsements, a supplemental license recreational crabbers are required to have in the Sound, goes directly to this effort.

This work continues to improve the marine environment and helps to ensure crab populations remain sustainable - providing commercial, tribal, and recreational fishing opportunities that are economically important to the Puget Sound region.

To fulfill requirements of RCW 77.32.430, dedicated derelict shellfish gear recovery funds expended in 2024: \$201,361.



Recovered derelict pots on a trailer in Port Townsend following an Enforcement gear sweep in 2021. Photo by WDFW Enforcement.



Recovered derelict pots stacked on the back deck of the WDFW R/V during an Enforcement gear sweep. Photo by WDFW Enforcement.

2024 Activities and Expenditures

WDFW contract with Northwest Straits Foundation

WDFW contracts with the Northwest Straits Foundation to document, locate, and remove derelict shellfish gear. This work occurs when most crab fishing seasons are closed. Using funds dedicated to this effort (\$1 from each crab state issues recreational Puget Sound Dungeness crab endorsement sold), the Northwest Straits Foundation contract expended \$107,000 to detect and remove derelict pots using side-scan sonar.

Through these efforts, 349 derelict pots were recovered, including 215 commercial pots and 134 recreational pots. At the time of removal, 294 crab were found entrapped in the pots, including 229 Dungeness crab (28 dead, 201 alive) and 65 red rock crab (8 dead, 57 alive). WDFW hosted in-person and virtual workshops and presentations, and distributed print materials and educational videos promoted through a social media ad campaign to support public outreach and education. These materials reached more than 265,000 individuals, and the educational videos received more than 442,655 views throughout the 2024 summer crabbing season.

WDFW Enforcement and Biologists conduct crab pot sweeps

WDFW Enforcement officers and fish and wildlife biologists coordinate to conduct crab pot sweeps during the popular summer recreational crab fishery. The sweeps, funded by additional revenue from

the sale of crab endorsements, took place on days when the recreational fishery was closed each week during the season. In 2024, this effort removed 1,013 crab pots and 17 shrimp pots from Puget Sound fisheries. 2,035 legal-size male crabs were released from these traps when they were recovered. Twenty-nine WDFW enforcement officers or interns and six shellfish staff worked 53 vessel days on the water and additional days returning pots or disposing of the gear.

Overall in 2024, WDFW biological staff spent \$94,178 on gear sweeps, documentation, outreach, gear return, and pot disposal. Enforcement staff spent \$47,707 in overtime hours designated for officers patrolling the recreational crab fishery in Puget Sound, with the majority of this time dedicated to the removal of derelict and lost fishing gear.

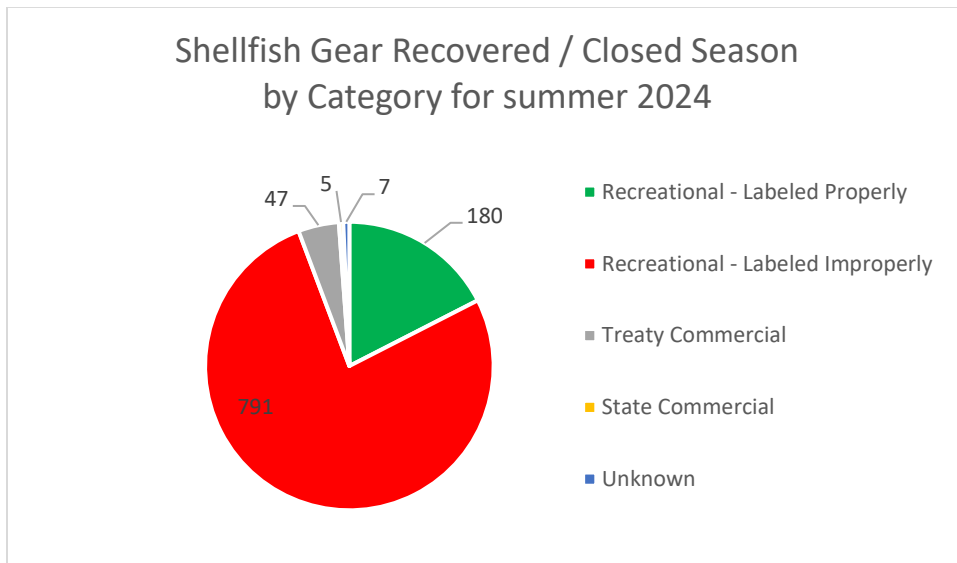


Figure 1. Pie chart showing total amount of derelict gear recovered in summer 2024 by fishery. Only 18.5% of the recreational crab pots recovered were properly and legibly labeled with all required information during the 2024 summer season.

Issues with recovered recreational traps

After recovery, WDFW examined recreational traps and collected data on key problems that likely contributed to them being lost or derelict. The following graphs highlight these problems including unweighted traps, floating lines, and buoys attached incorrectly.

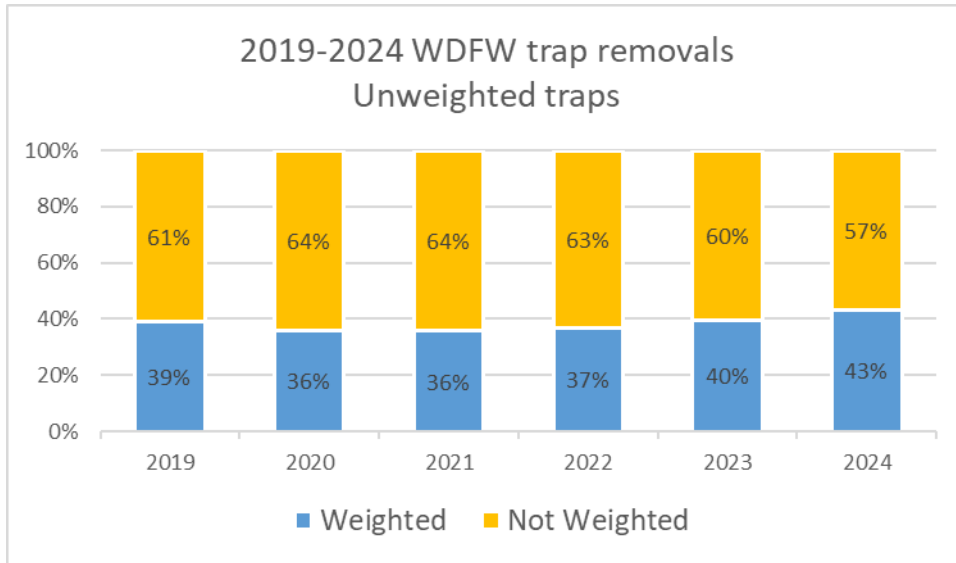


Figure 2. Bar chart showing the percentage of recreational derelict gear recovered in the summer season (years 2019-2024) which did not have significant weight by design AND had no weight added to keep that lighter design in place during tidal exchanges.

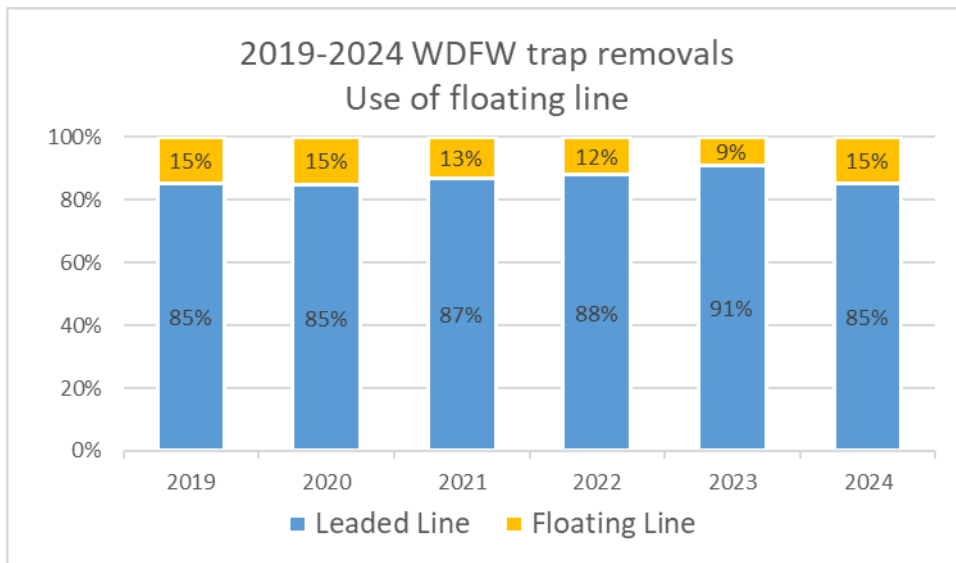


Figure 3. Bar chart showing the percentage of recreational derelict gear recovered in the summer season summer (years 2019-2024) which had floating line and no attached weight to keep it from collecting on the surface of the water as required by law.

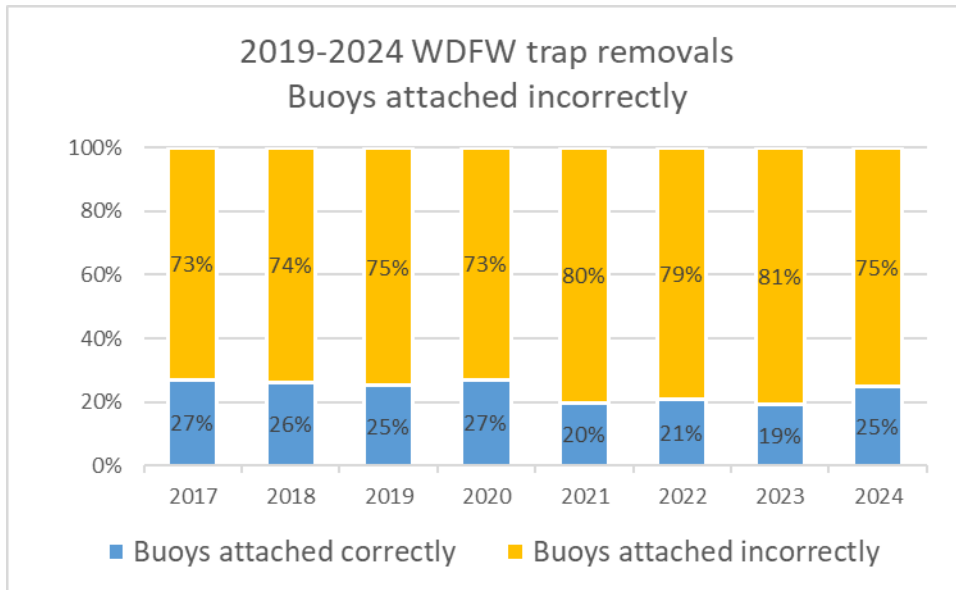


Figure 4. Bar chart showing the percentage of recreational derelict gear recovered in the summer season (years 2019-2024) which had illegal buoys OR buoys attached incorrectly so that drag in the current could pull the trap away from where it was set.

Hood Canal targeted pot removal

During the 2023-2025 biennium, WDFW received an unfunded proviso directing the Department to prioritize the the removal of derelict and abandoned crab pot gear in the north Hood Canal (Crab Management Region 5 in Marine Area 12 and a portion of Marine Area 9).

Of the gear that was removed during the 2024 season, 89 crab pots were removed during pot sweeps in north Hood Canal specifically, which included 66 recreational, 21 Treaty commercial pots, and two pots of unknown source. 300 crabs were released from these traps in north Hood Canal. Six WDFW enforcement officers or interns and two shellfish staff worked seven vessel days removing gear in north Hood Canal.

Of the total spent by WDFW biological staff on gear sweeps, gear return, and pot disposal, approximately 10% was applied to Hood Canal removals.

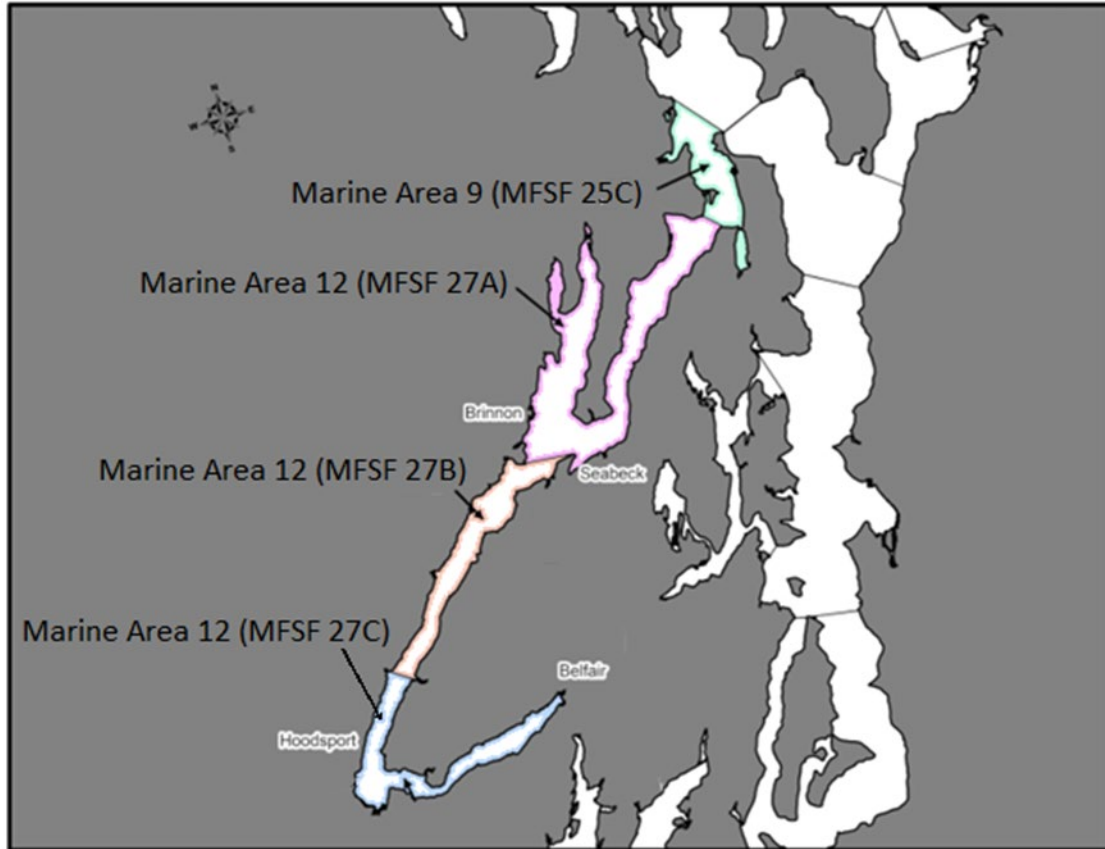


Figure 5. Map showing Crab Management Region 5, which is comprised of Marine Area 12 (all of Hood Canal) and a portion of Marine Area 9 north of the Hood Canal bridge (Catch Area 25C).

Growing interest in derelict gear removal

The Department has been supporting a growing interest in derelict gear removal by external groups through collaborations. In recent years, the agency has been approached by various groups to support and/or collaborate on small-scale projects aimed at removing subsurface derelict gear. These collaborations have involved community, vocational, non-profit, and tribal organizations including the [Jefferson and Clallam County Marine Resources Committees](#), Olympic Peninsula Puget Sound Anglers Association, Innerspace Exploration Team, and Tulalip Tribes. Most projects have focused on building partnerships and engaging the public on the prevention and threats of derelict gear in addition to conducting actual removals. Some projects have also aimed to enhance opportunities for K-12 curriculum or robotics teams (i.e. use of remotely operated vehicles for gear removal).

The Department will continue to work with a broad range of groups to expand awareness related to pot loss in Puget Sound waters and support the work of interested and capable teams to participate in subsurface gear removal.