

Derelict Shellfish Gear

2025 Report to the Legislature



January 2026



State of Washington
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

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January 2, 2026

The Honorable Mike Chapman
Chair, Senate Agriculture, Water,
Natural Resources, and Parks
402 Legislative Building
Post Office Box 40424
Olympia, WA 98504-0424

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 2025.

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

2025 Report to the Legislature

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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 the 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 Pacific 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 10,700 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.

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

This work continues to improve the marine environment and helps 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 2025: \$288,784.



Figure 1. Recovered derelict pots on a trailer in Port Townsend following an enforcement gear sweep in 2021. Photo by WDFW Enforcement.

2025 Activities and Expenditures

The Washington state legislature specifies, under RCW 77.32.430, that a portion of the revenue received from the sale of each Dungeness crab endorsement be used for the removal and disposal of derelict gear either directly from the department or under contract with a third party. During the 2025 legislative session, SB 5583 passed, implementing several changes to Department-issued license fees, and designates 11% of revenue from the sale of each Dungeness crab endorsement to be used directly for derelict gear removal. Previously, the law required this portion to be \$1 from each crab endorsement sold. In 2025, the Department applied these dedicated funds to support pot removal through contracts with the Northwest Straits Foundation (NWSF) and through a seasonal WDFW-run pot removal program done in collaboration with WDFW Enforcement.

WDFW contract with Northwest Straits Foundation

WDFW contracts with NWSF to document, locate, and remove derelict shellfish gear. The NWSF pot removal work plan is developed in coordination with the Department and is conducted during periods when most crab fishing seasons are closed. In 2025, the NWSF contract expended \$198,494 to detect and remove derelict pots using side-scan sonar. Removal efforts were focused on Port Townsend Bay in Jefferson County, Dungeness Bay in Clallam County, and Port Gardner in Snohomish County.

Through these efforts, 334 derelict crab pots were recovered (113 in Port Gardner; 132 in Port Townsend Bay; 89 in Dungeness Bay), which included 111 commercial pots and 223 recreational pots. At the time of removal, 286 crabs were found entrapped in the pots, including 247 Dungeness crabs (22 dead, 225 alive) and 39 red rock crabs (2 dead, 37 alive). The NWSF worked with WDFW crustacean team staff to host several in-person and virtual workshops and presentations, reaching more than 230 people, 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 551,065 views throughout the 2025 summer crabbing season.

WDFW Enforcement and biologists conduct crab pot sweeps

WDFW Enforcement officers and 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 2025, this effort removed 869 crab pots, 22 buoys with line only, and six shrimp pots from Puget Sound fisheries. A total of 1,425 legal-size male crabs were released from the 669 crab traps where the data on trapped crabs was collected. A total of 26 WDFW enforcement officers and seven shellfish staff worked 49 vessel days on the water and additional days returning pots or disposing of the gear. Overall, in 2025, WDFW biological staff spent \$90,291 on gear sweeps, documentation, outreach, gear return, and pot disposal.



Figure 2. Recovered derelict pots stacked on the back deck of WDFW 699 during an enforcement gear sweep. Photo by Korie Griffith, WDFW crustacean program.

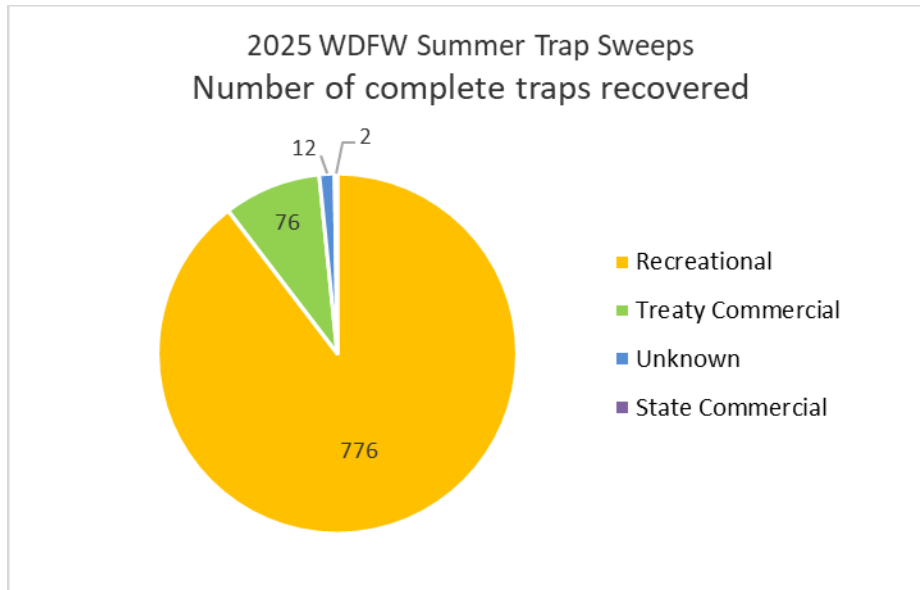


Figure 3. Total amount of derelict gear recovered from the 2025 summer fishery. Only 35.7% of the recreational crab pots recovered and examined were properly and legibly labeled with all required information.

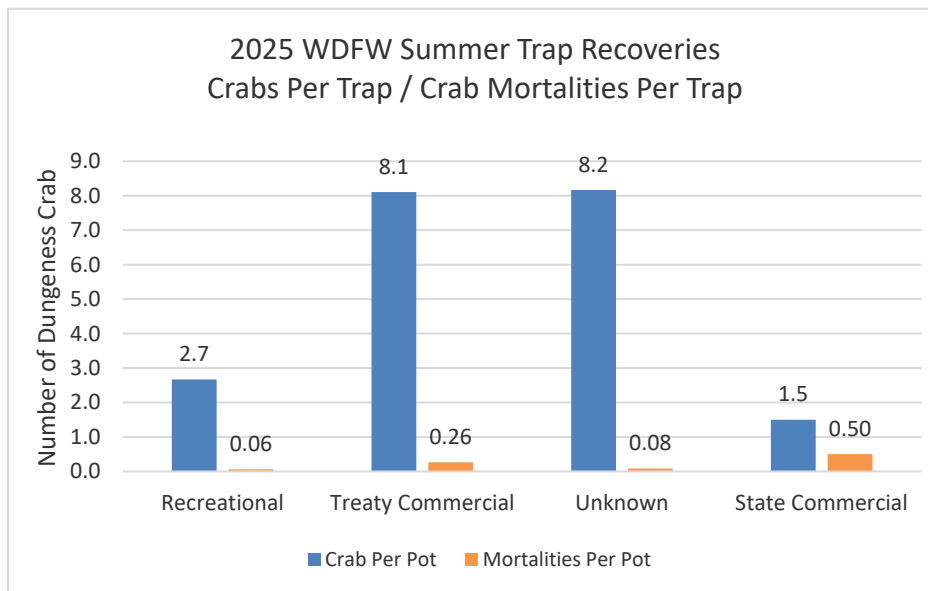


Figure 4. Mean number of crab (alive and dead) found in traps recovered during summer enforcement sweeps.

Issues with recovered recreational traps

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

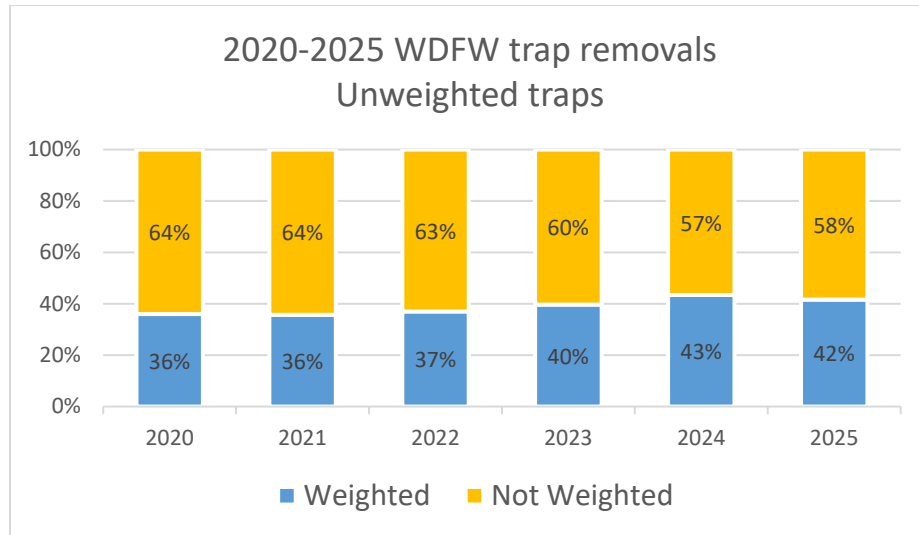


Figure 5. Percentage of recreational derelict gear recovered in the summer season (years 2020-2025), which did not have significant weight by design and had no weight added to keep that lighter design in place during tidal exchanges.

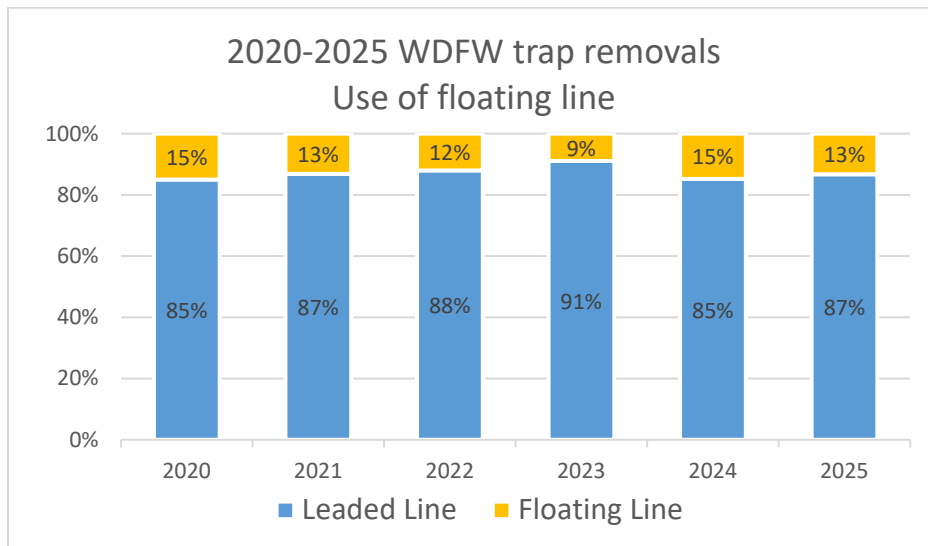


Figure 6. Percentage of recreational derelict gear recovered in summer (years 2020-2025), which had a floating line and no attached weight to keep it from collecting on the surface of the water as required by law.

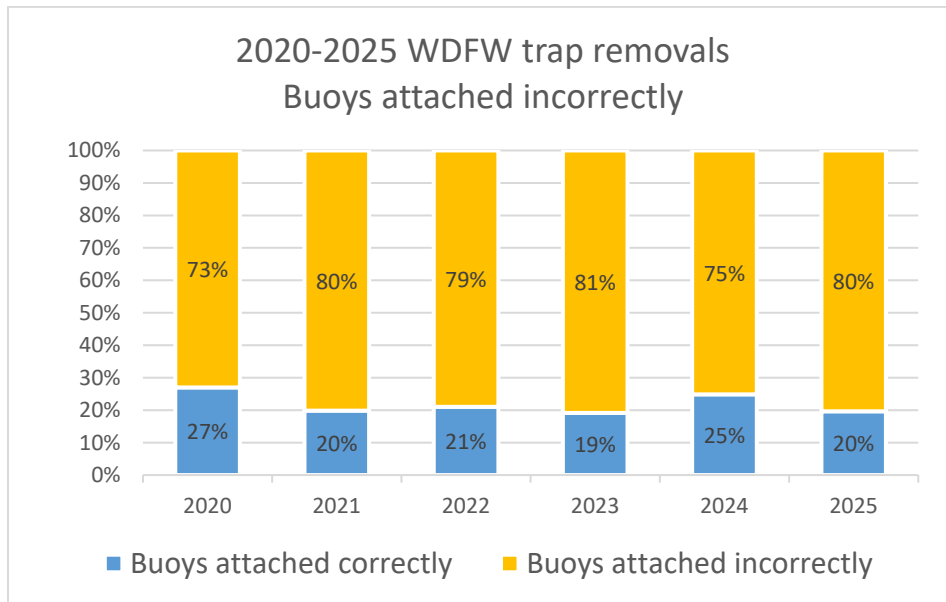


Figure 6. Percentage of recreational derelict gear recovered in the summer season (years 2020-2025), which had illegal buoys or buoys attached incorrectly so that drag in the current could pull the trap away from where it was set.

Tracking commercial crab fishery pot loss

The Puget Sound commercial Dungeness crab fishery is a limited-entry fishery that is capped at 248 licenses. Puget Sound commercial crab licenses are issued 100 pot tags annually. Up to three licenses are permitted to be stacked on a single vessel. Pot limits are set on a regional basis and typically range between 25 and 50 pots per license. Before the 2023-2024 commercial crab season, WDFW issued replacement tags to commercial license holders who attested that gear was lost. However, replacement tag tracking and reporting was logistically challenging and historically suffered from poor internal compliance with mechanisms to accurately record and issue replacement tags.

Starting in the 2023-2024 crab season, the Department stopped issuing separate replacement tags beyond the 100 pot tags issued annually. At that time, WDFW also implemented a new electronic reporting mechanism, “Buoy Tag Replacement Request Form”, that is directly used by license holders to report lost gear and request replacements from the pool of tags they already have on hand. This effectively capped the amount of commercial gear that could be used annually to the total number of buoy tags issued annually to all license holders. This change facilitated more accurate and detailed estimates for gear lost in the Puget Sound commercial Dungeness crab fishery.

During the 2024-2025 Season, a total of 708 pots were reported as lost by 79 vessels. Commercial harvesters were asked to provide a self-determined “Reason for Loss” when submitting replacement requests to the “Buoy Tag Replacement Request Form”. Of the 708 total pots reported lost, 305 were due to “Marine Traffic”, 208 were due to “Weather, Tides, or Currents”, 69 were due to “Theft”, and 126

pots were due to “Unknown” reasons. Most of the gear, 422 pots, was reported lost in October during peak state commercial harvest effort. Totals of 195, 65, and 20 pots were reported lost in November, December, and January, respectively, and six pots were reported lost in February when the commercial area with the most available harvest closed. Despite having multiple areas open, no pots were reported lost in March and April.

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).

WDFW 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.