



State of Washington  
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

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December 27, 2023

The Honorable Kevin Van De Wege  
Chair, Senate Agriculture, Water  
Natural Resources, and Parks  
212 John A. Cherberg Building  
Post Office Box 40424  
Olympia, WA 98504-0424

The Honorable Mike Chapman  
Chair, House Rural Development,  
Natural Resources, and Parks  
437A Legislative Building  
Post Office Box 40600  
Olympia, WA 98504-0600

Dear Chairs Van De Wege and Chapman:

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 2023. The report also summarizes the work effort dedicated to an unfunded proviso in the Department's 2023 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 Tom McBride, WDFW's Legislative Director, at (360) 902-2226.

Sincerely,

Kelly Susewind  
Director

# Derelict Shellfish Gear

## Report to the Legislature



Washington  
Department of  
**FISH &  
WILDLIFE**

Dec. 31, 2023

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Cover photo provided by WDFW staff.

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## Background

Abandoned, lost, or discarded crab fishing pots in the waters of Puget Sound 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 ecosystem of Puget Sound and the region's economy.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), tribal co-managers, and other organizations are working to help remove 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 catch accounting license necessary to recreationally fish for crab in the Sound, go 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 2023: \$284,967.



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



# 2023 Activities and Expenditures

## Northwest Straits Foundation Contract

WDFW contracts with the Northwest Straits Foundation to find and remove derelict shellfish gear while the crab fishing season is closed. Using funds dedicated to this effort (\$1 from each Puget Sound Crab Endorsement sold), a total of \$128,000 was expended through a Northwest Straits Foundation contract to detect and remove derelict pots using side-scan sonar. Through these efforts, a total of 647 derelict pots were recovered which included 210 commercial pots and 437 recreational pots. Found entrapped in the crab pots were 572 Dungeness crab (80 dead and 492 alive) and 124 red rock crab (seven dead and 162 alive), illustrating the need to continue removing derelict pots from Puget Sound waters.

## 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 2023, this effort removed 1,283 crab pots from Puget Sound, including recreational, state commercial, and Treaty commercial pots. A total of 2,104 legal-size male crabs were released from these traps when they were recovered. A total of 22 WDFW enforcement officers or interns and five shellfish staff worked 48 vessel days on the water, and additional days returning pots or disposing of the gear.



Figure 2. Derelict crab pots removed from Puget Sound by WDFW staff.

Overall, WDFW biological staff in 2023 spent \$101,350 on gear sweeps, documentation, outreach, gear return, and pot disposal. Enforcement staff spent a total of \$55,617 in overtime hours designated for officers patrolling the recreational crab fishery in Puget Sound, with most of this time dedicated to the removal of derelict and lost fishing gear.

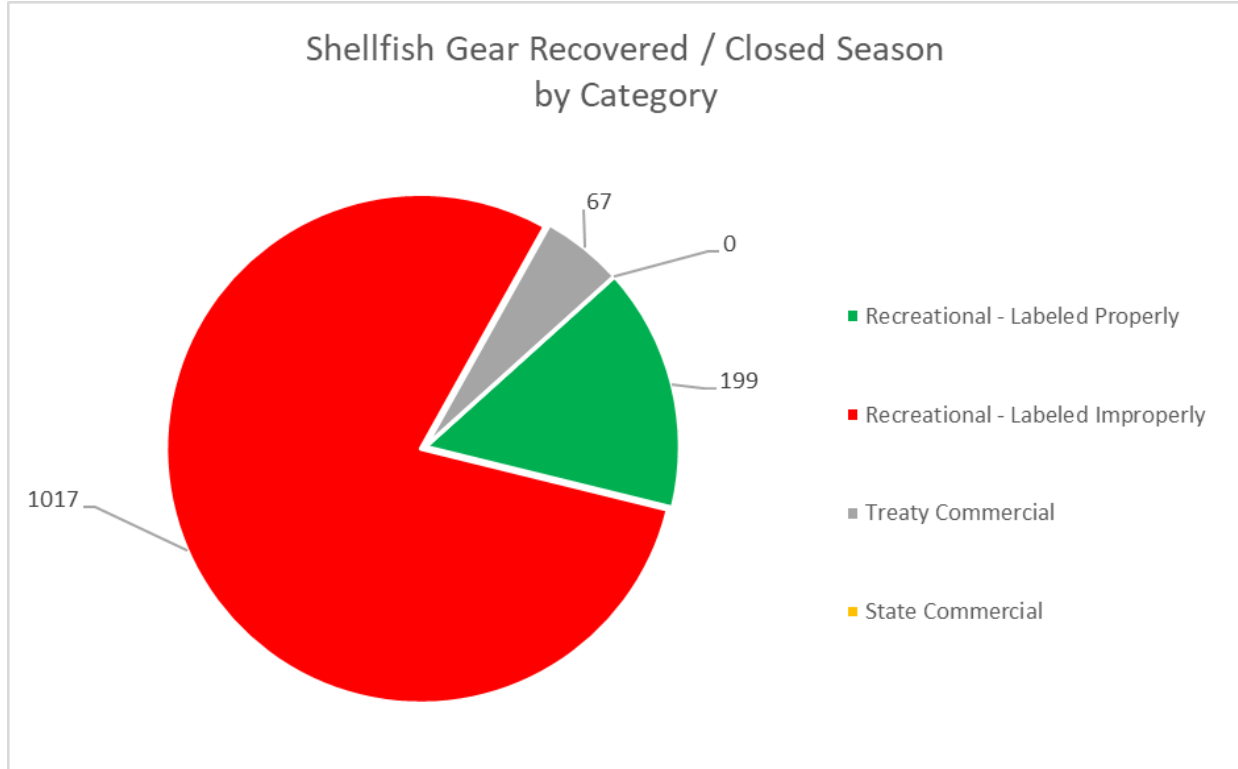


Figure 3. Pie chart showing total amount of derelict gear recovered in summer 2023 by fishery. Only 16.4% of the recreational crab pots recovered were properly and legibly labeled with all required information during the 2023 summer season.

### Targeted Removal Efforts in Hood Canal

During the 2023-2025 legislative cycle, WDFW received an unfunded proviso directing the department to prioritize the removal of derelict and abandoned crab pot gear in the North Hood Canal.

Of the gear that was removed during the 2023 season, 77 crab pots were removed during pot sweeps in North Hood Canal specifically, which included 74 recreational and three Treaty commercial pots. A total of 129 crabs were released from these traps in north Hood Canal. A total of 7 WDFW enforcement officers or interns worked five 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.

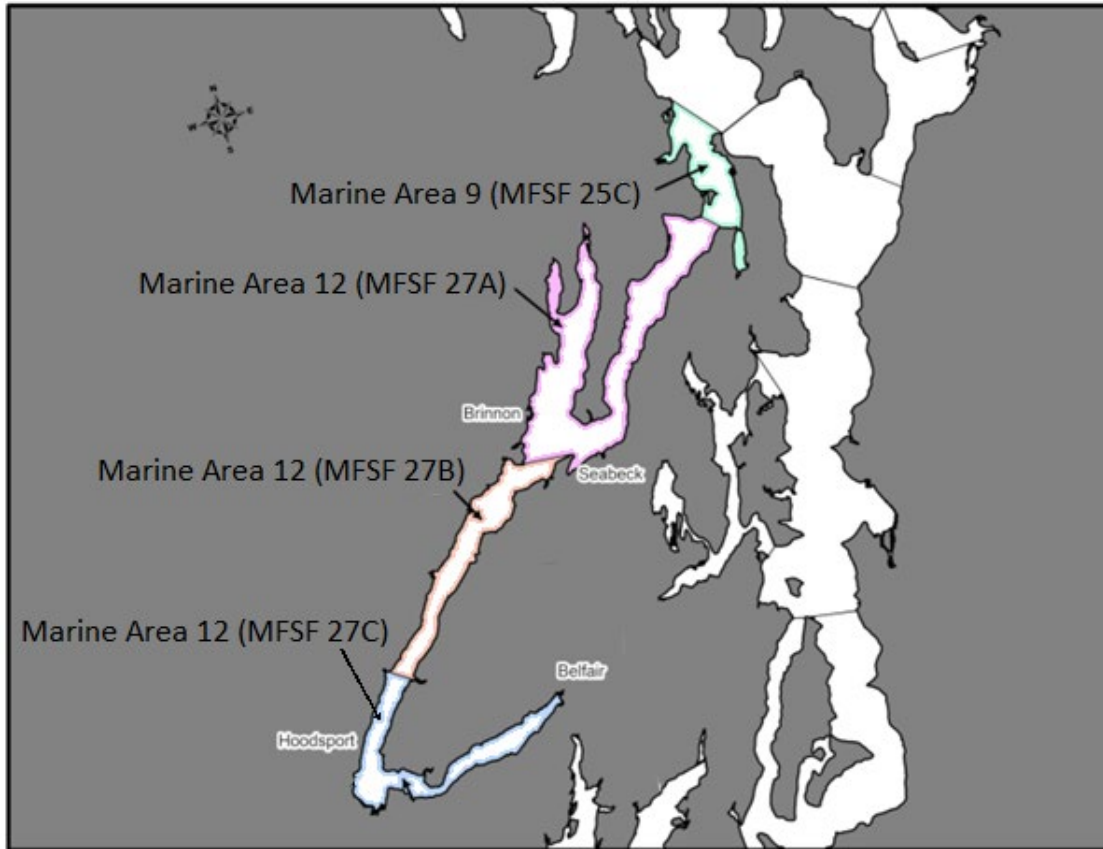


Figure 4. Map showing Crab Management Region 5, which is comprised of Marine Area 12 (all of Hood Canal) and a portion of Marine Area 9 north of the Hood Canal bridge (Catch Area 25C).

## Increased Investment

The department has increased investment in derelict gear prevention and removal by hiring new staff to the Puget Sound shellfish program who have specific duties focused on educating the public on the risks of pot loss. With this increased program capacity, the department has formed a derelict fishing gear working group that engages in cross-program coordination to improve lost gear reporting and facilitates information workflows to document risks and support removal efforts. Additionally, the program has become active participants of a stakeholder workgroup tasked with the revision of the Puget Sound Lost Pot Prevention Plan.