2025-2026 Risk Assessment
Preliminary Assessment and Available Data for Risk Assessment Mitigation Program

Last updated: March 10, 2026

PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

This Preliminary Assessment and Management Recommendation has been developed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) Marine Region staff to inform the Risk Assessment Mitigation Program (RAMP; Section 132.8, Title 14, California Code of Regulations). A Final Assessment and Management Recommendation will be prepared after conferring with the Working Group on March 11, 2026.

Recommended Management Actions

Commercial Fishery:

- Fishing Zones 1 and 2: Continue 15% Gear Reduction
- Fishing Zone 3: Continue 40% Gear Reduction
- Fishing Zones 4 and 5: Season Closure effective March 27, 2026, at 6:00 p.m. and authorize the use of Alternative Gear on April 3, 2026, at 7:00 a.m.
    - Two gear types are currently authorized for the commercial Dungeness crab fishery. Visit the Whale Safe Fisheries webpage for more information.

Recreational Fishery:

- Fishing Zones 4 and 5: Crab Trap Prohibition, effective March 27, 2026, at 6:00p.m.

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I. Management Recommendation Summary Rationale

For the commercial fishery, Marine Region's preliminary recommendation is for the Director to close the commercial fishery in Fishing Zones 4 and 5, effective March 27, 2026, at 6:00 p.m., and to continue the 15% Gear Reduction in Fishing Zones 1 and 2 and 40% Gear Reduction in Fishing Zone 3. Alternative Gear would then be authorized for use on April 3, 2026, for Zones 4 and 5.

For the recreational fishery, Marine Region recommends a Crab Trap Prohibition for Fishing Zones 4 and 5, effective March 27, 2026, at 6:00p.m. A Fleet Advisory remains for all Fishing Zones.

These preliminary recommendations are based on increasing Marine Life Concentrations, recent humpback whale entanglement reports, entanglement history, high Habitat Compression Index (HCI) and migration patterns of humpback whales. The recently reported entanglements in Monterey and Santa Barbara with gear consistent with commercial Dungeness crab trap gear require management action by the CDFW Director. Furthermore, entanglement risk will increase as more whales arrive from their winter breeding grounds seeking foraging opportunities. Based on historical migration patterns and humpback whale observations in areas south of Fishing Zone 5, humpback whale observations are expected to sharply increase in the coming weeks, therefore the Gear Reductions in Fishing Zones 4 and 5 are no longer sufficient to reduce entanglement risk. A Season Closure for the commercial fishery and a Crab Trap Prohibition for the recreational fishery in Fishing Zones 4 and 5 is also recommended to reduce the co-occurrence of trap gear and humpback whales.

Additionally, current coastal sea surface temperatures are among the warmest for this time of year ever recorded. These temperatures have persisted through most of December, rivaled only by the wintertime anomalies seen during the strongest El Nino on record during 1997-98 and the "Warm Blob" years of 2014-15. Additionally, high habitat compression has been observed in the central and southern Fishing Zones, increasing whale entanglement risk. Therefore, precautionary measures need to be taken due to these oceanographic conditions as they can contribute to cool habitat compression onshore which has historically significantly increased the occurrence of entanglements due to overlap of foraging whales and crab trap gear.

No additional management actions are recommended for Fishing Zones 1, 2 and 3 at this time as Gear Reductions are already in place, effort is steadily decreasing, and fishing is occurring at shallower depths on average. Fishing effort as reported in bi-weekly reports for Fishing Zones 1 and 2, are decreasing and occurring largely in shallower depths (average depth of 38 fathoms). The number of permits reporting for the Feb-16 reporting period was 206 permits which decreased to 148 permits reported for the Mar-1 period. Similarly, Fishing Zone 3 has declining effort as only 78 permits submitted for the Mar-1 reporting period and 114 permits were submitted for the Feb-16 period. The average depth fished in Fishing Zone 3 was 41 fathoms.

Management Actions for Fishing Zones 1, 2, and 3 for the commercial fishery will be re-evaluated at the next risk assessment in early April and the fleet should be prepared for additional Management Actions to be applied to reduce entanglement risk. Recreational Management Actions will also be re-evaluated for Fishing Zones 1, 2, and 3.

Entanglements: Two confirmed entanglements of humpback whales in unknown fishing

gear have been reported in February 2026. The first was reported on Feb. 8, 2026, off Santa Barbara and was observed with a line wrapped around tail stock and trailing a red bullet buoy. The second was reported in Monterey Bay on Feb. 28, 2026. The whale has multiple lines wrapped around the caudal peduncle, draping over the flukes. There are two faded and compressed bullet buoys close to the flukes moving the trailing lines. These cases are still being reviewed by NMFS.

Marine Life Concentrations: Monterey Bay Whale Watch data showed a high of 15 humpback whales observed on a half-day trip on Feb. 28, 2026, in Fishing Zone 4.

For additional details, see the Entanglement and Marine Life Concentration sections of this Available Data document.

II. Alternative Management Actions for the Commercial Fishery

Alternatives Considered but Rejected

- Gear Reduction - 60% Gear Reduction was considered for Fishing Zone 3 as arrival of humpback whales in the area is expected in the coming weeks based on historical migration patterns. Further reduction of vertical lines in the water would provide additional protection to humpback whales as their numbers increase, however, given declining effort in the area this was not a recommended action.
- Depth Restriction- will not sufficiently provide protection due to distribution of humpback whales across depths and may concentrate trap gear thereby increasing entanglement risk. Furthermore, with high habitat compression, constraining fishing activity to shallow depths could concentrate gear where whales may be concentrated as well.

AVAILABLE DATA

III. Triggers Requiring Management Action

I. Confirmed Entanglements: §132.8(a)(4); Information from NOAA: §132.8(d)(2); and Triggers for Management Action: §132.8(c)

Data provided by: Lauren Saez and Dan Lawson (National Marine Fisheries Service)

The table below outlines the confirmed entanglements under RAMP beginning with the 2026 calendar year. See "2025-2026 Commercial Dungeness Crab Fishery - Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)" for information about the RAMP Entanglement Evaluation. More information and definitions, please see the RAMP Entanglement History document.

The current Entanglement Evaluation is pending for humpback whales for the 2026 calendar year. Until November 1, 2028, a Confirmed Entanglement in Unknown Fishing Gear shall be applied as one-quarter (0.25) of a Confirmed Entanglement in California Commercial Dungeness Crab Gear. As of March 10, 2026, there have been zero Confirmed Entanglements of blue whales or leatherback sea turtles during the 2026 calendar year.

Table 1. Actionable Species Entanglements beginning in 2026, pursuant to RAMP regulations.

Entanglement ID	Date	Species	Fishery	Score
20260228Mn	02/28/26	Humpback whale	Pending	Pending
20260208Mn	02/08/26	Humpback whale	Pending	Pending

II. Marine Life Concentrations: §132.8(c)(2)

Data provided by: California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Monterey Bay Whale Watch (processed by Karin Forney, Upwell)

According to the RAMP regulations for the period of March 1 until the Fishing Season closes statewide a trigger has been met when:

- The number of humpback whales is greater than or equal to 10, or there is a running average of five or more animals over a one-week period within a single Fishing Zone.
- The number of blue whales is greater than or equal to three, or there is a running average of three or more animals over a one-week period within a single Fishing Zone
- The number of Pacific leatherback sea turtle is greater than or equal to one within any Fishing Zone

Table 21. Summary of available CDFW-approved survey data for Marine Life Concentrations for each Fishing Zone, and whether the triggers have been met for any Fishing Zone.

Fishing Zone	CDFW-approved survey data	Triggers attained?
Zone 1	None	NA
Zone 2	None	NA
Zone 3	CDFW Aerial Survey	No
Zone 4	CDFW Aerial Survey, MBWW	Yes
Zone 5	None	NA

A. CDFW Surveys (Fishing Zones 3-4)

On February 26, 2026, CDFW conducted an aerial survey from the coast to the 100-fathom contour line at an altitude of 1,000ft covering Fishing Zones 3-4 with partial coverage of Fishing Zone 2 (Figure 1). Conditions were favorable with Beaufort states between 1 and 3. No Actionable Species were observed. In Fishing Zone 3, three unidentified whales and five gray whales were observed.

Table 3. Counts of Actionable Species seen by CDFW aerial survey conducted on February 26, 2026.

Fishing Zone	Humpback whales	Unidentified whales
Zone 3	0	3
Zone 4	0	0

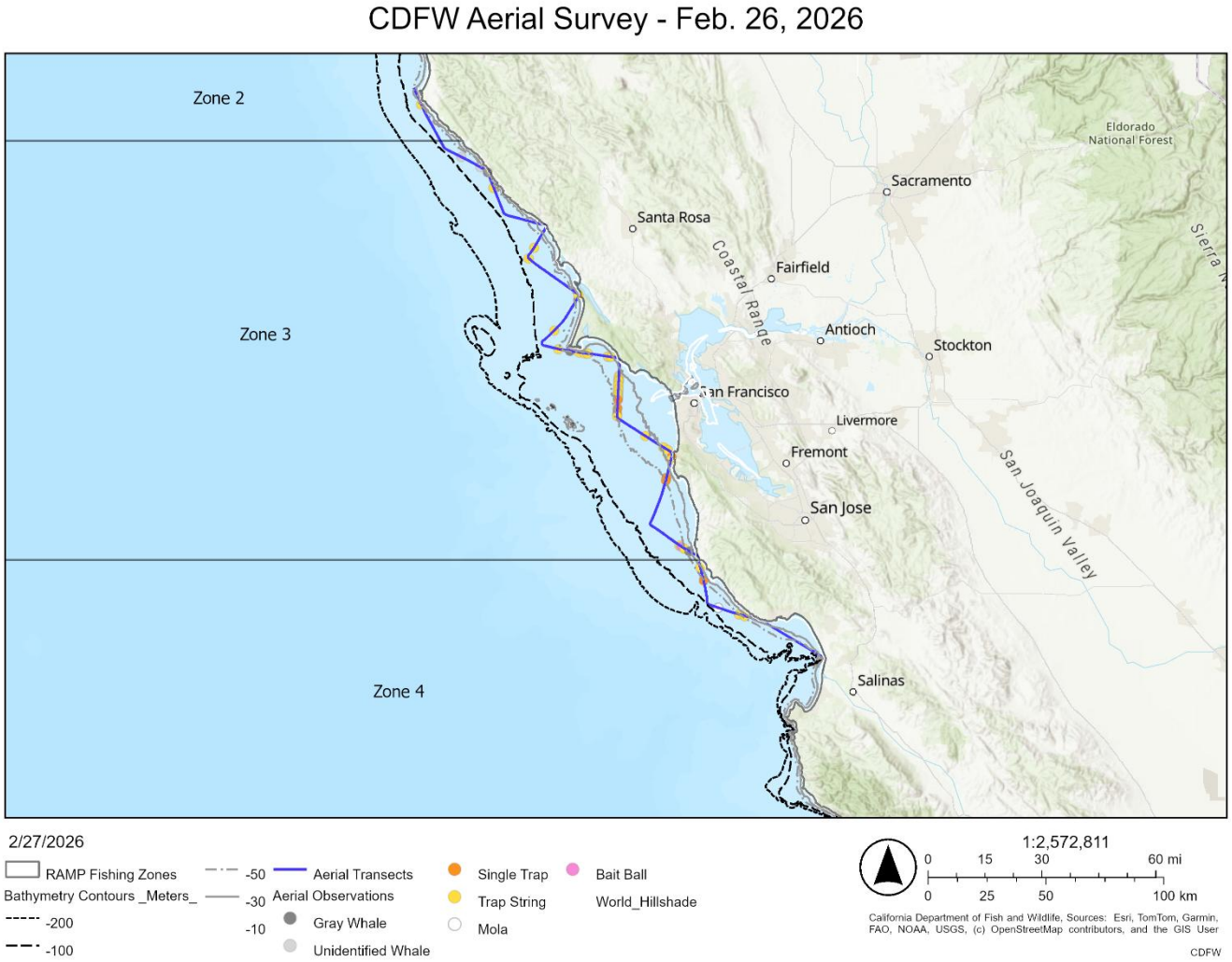

Figure 1. Map of aerial survey conducted by CDFW on February 26, 2026.

B. Monterey Bay Whale Watch Surveys (Fishing Zone 4)

Monterey Bay Whale Watch conducted whale-watching trips in southern Monterey Bay on all seven days during the week of February 22-28, 2026. The 7-day average number of humpback whales-per-half-day-trip during 22 - 28 February 22-28, 2026, was 0.76, with a peak of 15 humpback whales observed on a half-day trip on February 28 (Figure 2).

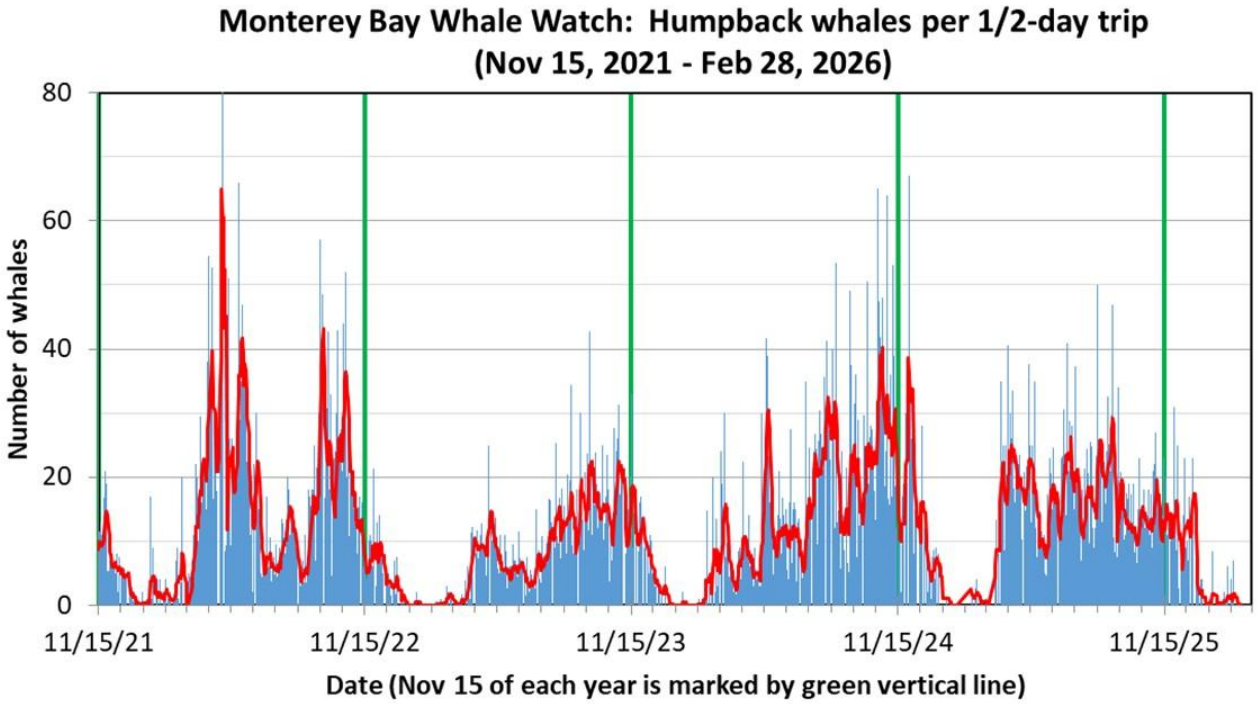

Figure 2. Standardized number of humpback whale sightings for Monterey Bay Whale Watch from 15 November 2021 – 28 February 2026. The y-axis is the number of whales per half-day trip; the thin blue bars are the average daily whale numbers, and the red line is a 7-day running average to make the patterns a bit easier to see. A vertical green line has been added at November 15 of each year for reference. Each tick mark is one month.

IV. Management Considerations

I. Historic patterns and current Actionable Species migration: §132.8(d)(5)

Data provided by: NOAA Channel Island National Marine Sanctuary (CINMS), Point Blue Conservation Science and Monterey Bay Whale Watch (processed by Karin Forney, Upwell)

A. CINMS Aerial Surveys (Santa Barbara Channel)

On February 23, 2026, NOAA CINMS and California Marine Sanctuary Foundation team conducted an aerial survey in the Santa Barbara Channel and documented 28 humpback whales, one unidentified whale, and one minke whale (Figure 3).

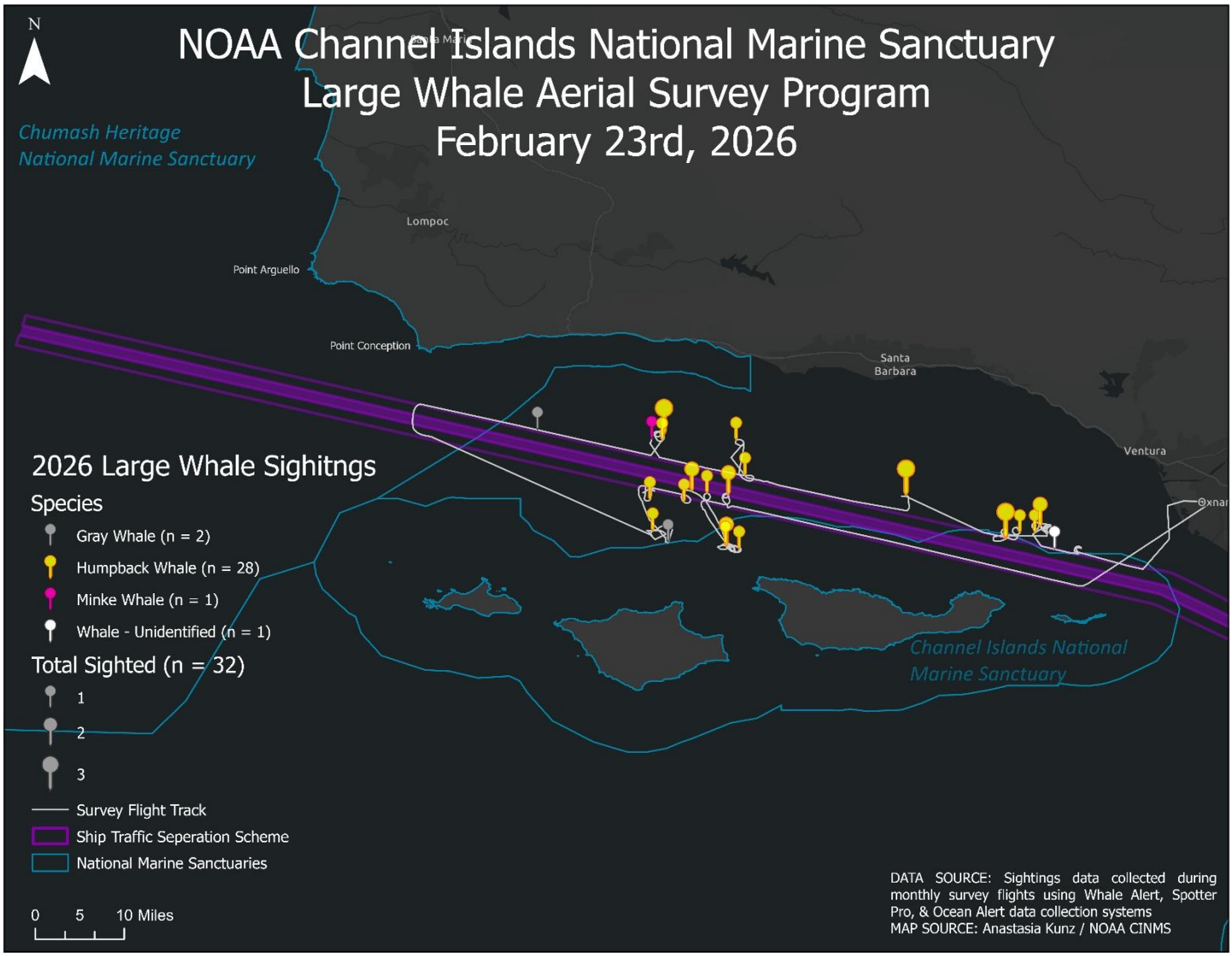

Figure 3. Map of aerial survey conducted by CINMS on February 23, 2026.

B. Point Blue Conservation Science (Fishing Zones 3, 4, and Santa Barbara Channel)

For current observation data please see the Point Blue Whale Alert map.

Table 4. Summary of available humpback and blue whale recorded reported via Point Blue Conservation Science in Fishing Zones 3, 4, and adjacent Fishing Zones during the seven-day period ending March, 6, 2026.

Fishing Zone	Number of humpback whales sighted	Number of blue whales sighted
Zone 3	4	0
Zone 4	NA	NA
Santa Barbara Channel	34	0

C. Monterey Bay Whale Watch (Fishing Zone 4)

The semi-monthly average number of humpback whales-per-half-day-trip in southern Monterey Bay is slightly higher than the historical average for this time of year, but still seasonally low (Figure 4).

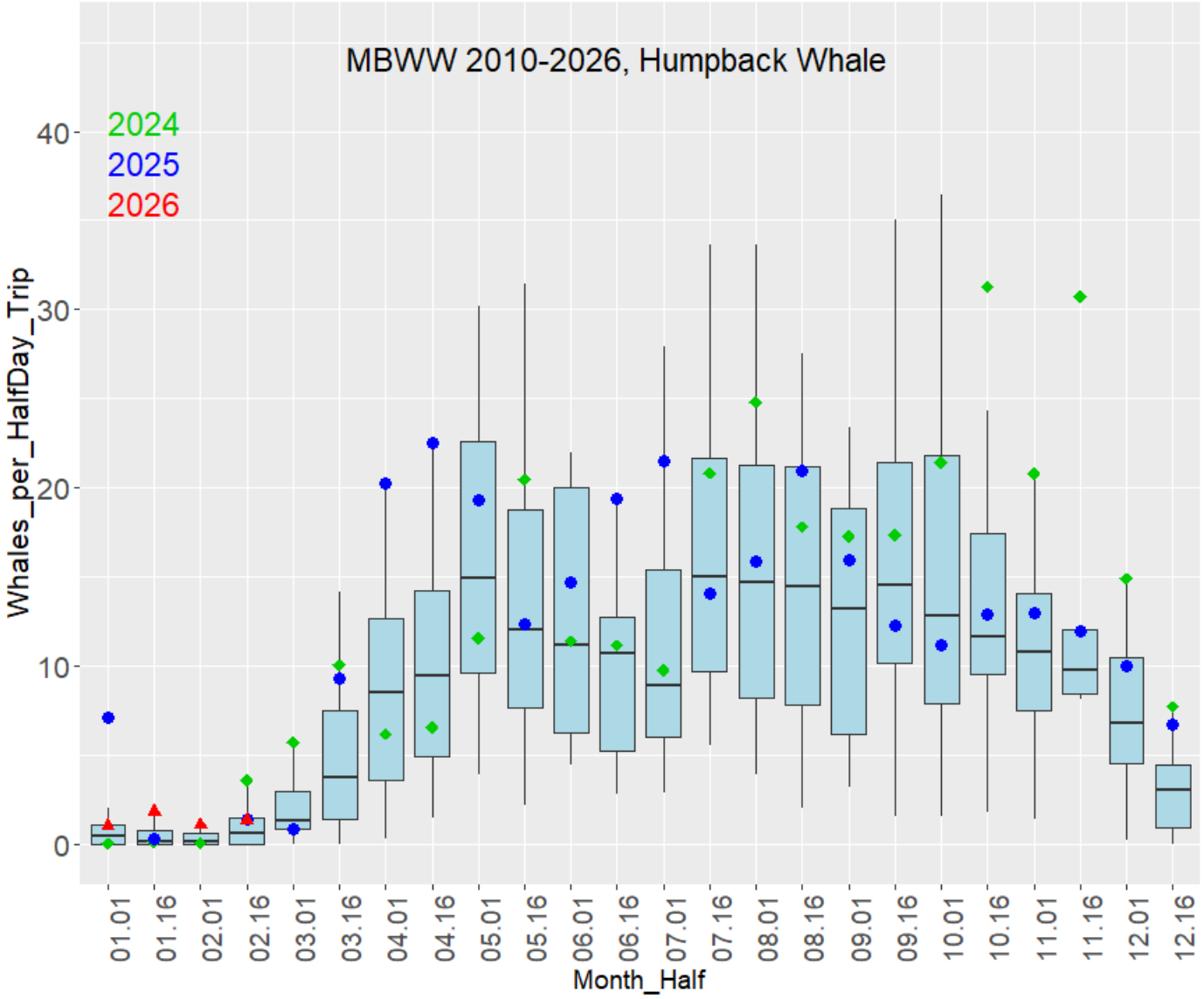

Figure 4. Historical Monterey Bay Whale Watch data for 2010-2026, summarizing the average and variation in the number of humpback whales per half-day trip on a semi-monthly basis (1st- 15th, 16th-end of month). This boxplot follows standard statistical practice in that the black horizontal line is the average number of whales; the blue box shows the 25th-75th percentiles (i.e., half of all past whale numbers are within the blue box); the vertical lines show the range of whale numbers excluding outliers, and outliers are shown as small black dots. Values for 2024 (green diamonds), 2025 (blue dots) and 2026 (red triangles) and are provided for reference, placing recent whale numbers in a historical context.

II. Fishing Season dynamics: §132.8(d)(6)

A. Marine Landings Data System *(All Fishing Zones)*

*Data provided by: California Department of Fish and Wildlife. *CDFW data presented in this section are preliminary and subject to revision.*

Fishing Zones 1 and 2 are currently open under a 15% Gear Reduction. The area between at the southern boundary of the Reading Rock State Marine Protected Areas (41° 17.6' N. latitude) to Cape Mendocino (40° 10.0' N. latitude) opened on Jan. 30, 2026. The rest of Fishing Zones 1-2 opened Jan. 15, 2026. Fishing Zones 3, 4 and 5 are currently open under a 40% Gear Reduction. These Fishing Zones opened on Jan. 5, 2026. A summary of landings from all Fishing Zones is provided below (Table 5).

Table 5. Summary of fishing season dynamics information for the commercial fishery, as of March 6, 2026.

Metric	**Value**
Season status	Zones 1-2 are under a 15% Gear Reduction Zones 3-5 are under a 40% Gear Reduction
Number of landings	3,788
Total volume (pounds)	8,179,268
Total Ex-Vessel Value	$39,738,851
Average unit price	$5.01
Total number of active vessels	372
Peak maximum potential traps (based on active permits)	92,558

** Estimates are also provided in the Bi-Weekly Fishing Activity Reports Subsection*

Total volume (pounds) peaked during the week of January 19, 2026, at 2.58 million pounds and has since been decreasing (Figure 5). Fishing Zone 1 shows the highest landings over the course of the season at 4.55 million pounds, followed by Fishing Zone 3 at 2.88 million pounds.

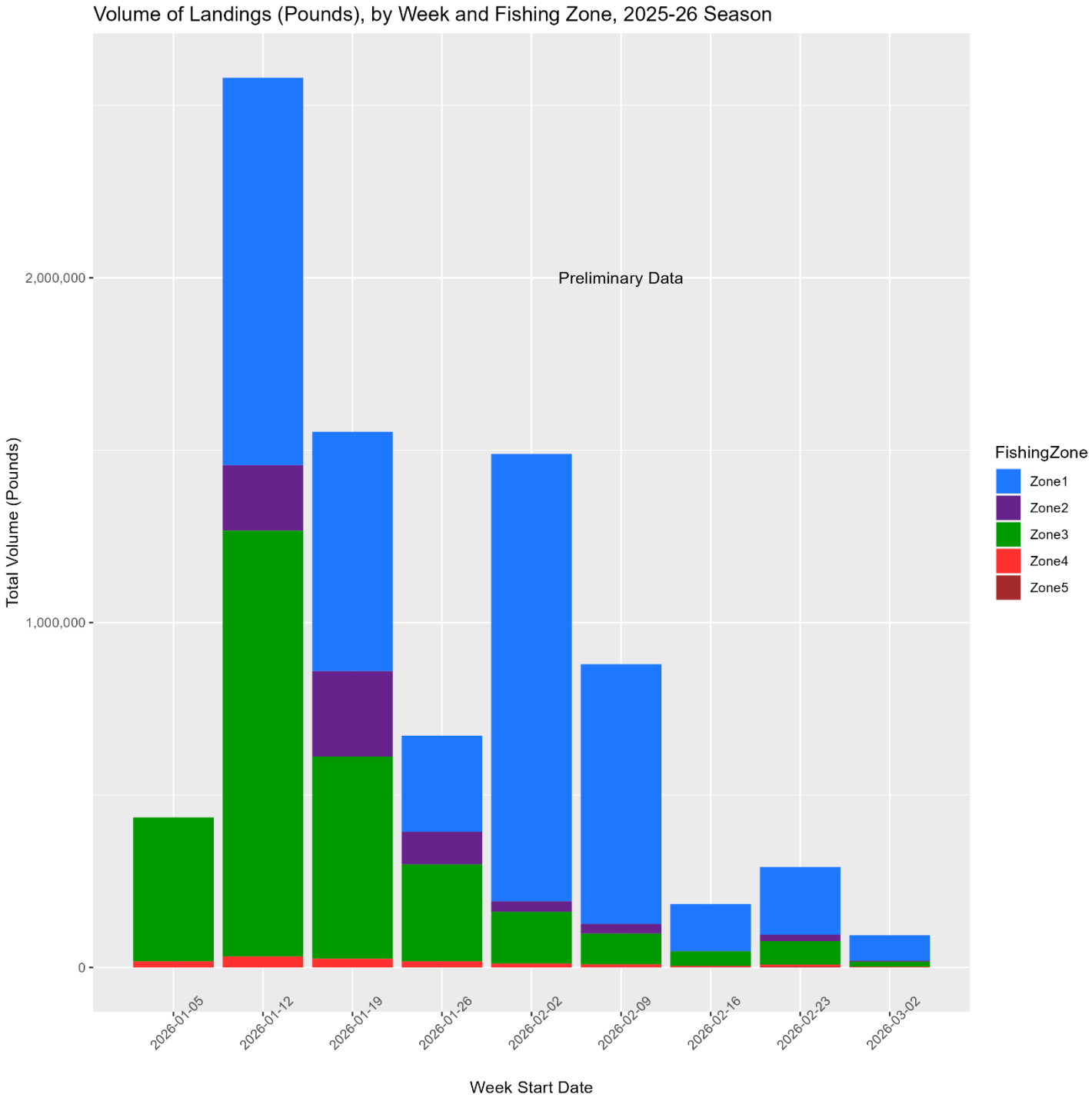

Figure 5. Volume (pounds) landed by week and Fishing Zone. Week 1 starts with the first day the commercial Dungeness crab fishery was open in any area, January 5, 2026. All data are preliminary and subject to change. Certain week-Fishing Zone combinations are withheld due to confidentiality constraints.

Fishing Zones 1 and 3 show the highest number of active vessels throughout the fishing season to date with a high of 334 active vessels (Figure 6). The number of active vessels peaked in early February and has fluctuated with a slight decline since then.

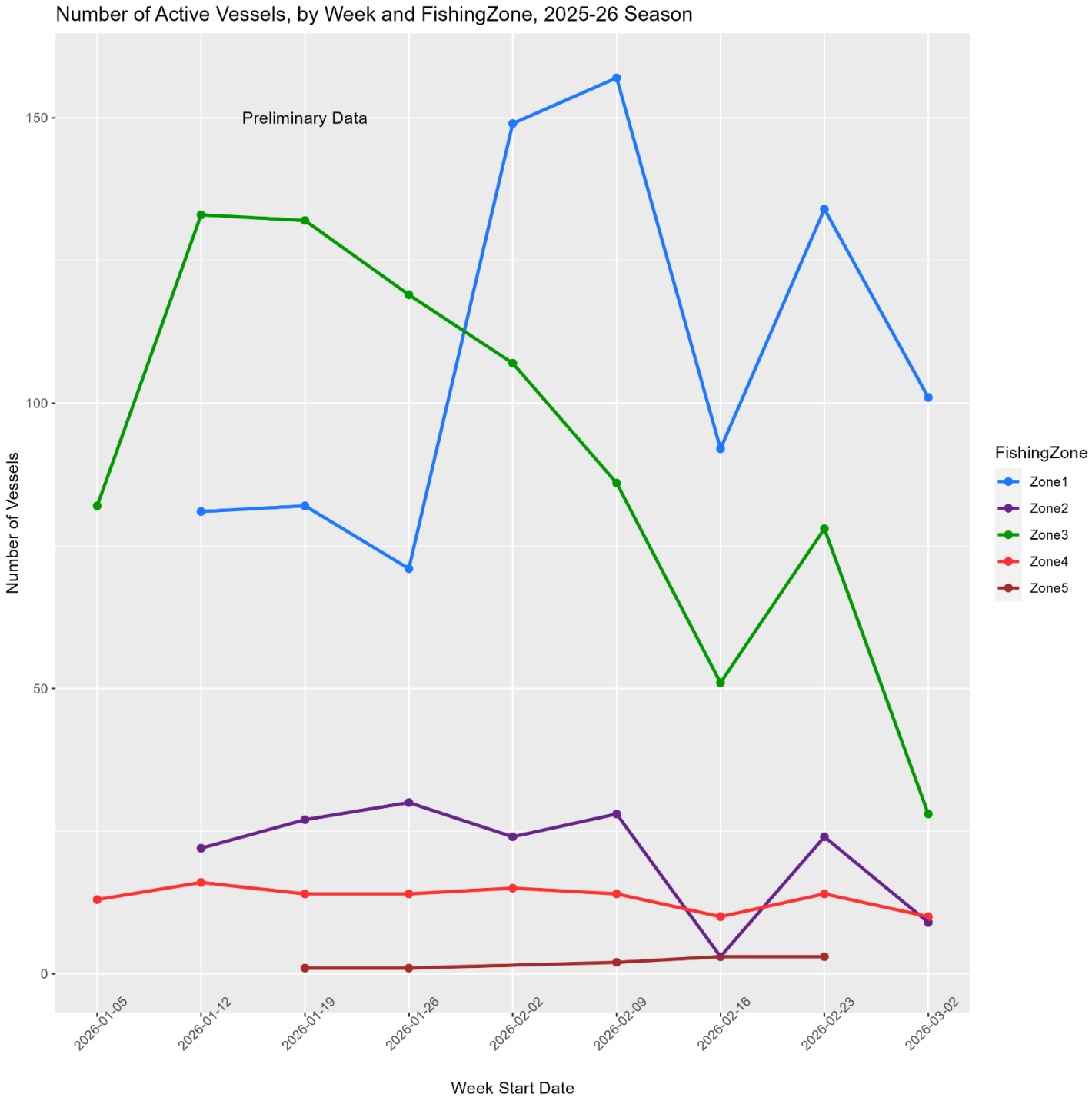

Figure 6. Number of active vessels by week and Fishing Zone. Week 1 starts with the first day the commercial Dungeness crab fishery was open in any area, January 5, 2026. All data are preliminary and subject to change. Some week-Fishing Zone combinations are withheld due to confidentiality constraints.

B. Bi-Weekly Fishing Activity Reports *(All Fishing Zones)*

CDFW has received bi-weekly reports since the first reporting period on January 16, 2026, through the most recent reporting period of March 1, 2026. A summary of reports received for February 16, 2026, are provided in Table 6 and those received for March 1, 2026, are provided in Table 7; note this summary may not reflect all permitted vessels participating in the fishery due to compliance issues.

Table 6. Summary of information provided for the February 16, 2026, bi-weekly reporting period by Fishing Zone (1-5). Accessed from CDFW's Bi-Weekly Reporting database on March 5, 2026. NR-C refers to data withheld due to confidentiality. All data are preliminary and subject to change.

Fishing Zone	Permits Reporting	Avg. Trap Number	Total Traps Set	Avg. Min. Depth (fa.)	Avg. Max. Depth (fa.)	Max. Depth (fa.)	Number of Newly Lost Traps
Zone 1	172	307	51,591	14	38	117	173
Zone 2	34	205	6,577	15	38	88	23
Zone 3	114	160	17,058	22	43	88	153
Zone 4	18	121	2,192	18	42	70	5
Zone 5	NR-C	NR-C	NR-C	NR-C	NR-C	NR-C	NR-C
Totals	338	NA	77,418	NA	NA	NA	354

Table 7. Summary of information provided for the March 1, 2026, bi-weekly reporting period by Fishing Zone (1-5). Accessed from CDFW's Bi-Weekly Reporting database on March 5, 2026. NR-C refers to data withheld due to confidentiality. All data are preliminary and subject to change.

Fishing Zone	Permits Reporting	Avg. Trap Number	Total Traps Set	Avg. Min. Depth (fa.)	Avg. Max. Depth (fa.)	Max. Depth (fa.)	Number of Newly Lost Traps
Zone 1	126	293	36,421	14	34	83	125
Zone 2	22	181	3,446	15	32	60	8
Zone 3	78	156	11,088	21	41	81	91
Zone 4	18	124	2,241	17	37	80	7
Zone 5	NR-C	NR-C	NR-C	NR-C	NR-C	NR-C	NR-C
Totals	244	NA	53,196	NA	NA	NA	231

Table 8. Total reported traps deployed in each Fishing Zone for the most recent four bi-weekly reporting periods. All data are preliminary and subject to change.

Fishing Zone	Jan 16 - Total Traps	Feb 1 - Total Traps	Feb 16 - Total Traps	Mar 1 - Total Traps
Zone 1	23,409	44,582	51,591	36,421
Zone 2	4,824	6,622	6,577	3,446
Zone 3	22,555	21,509	17,058	11,088
Zone 4	2,055	2,698	2,192	2,241
Zone 5	0	0	NR-C	NR-C
Totals	52,843	75,411	77,418	53,196

III. Ocean conditions: §132.8(d)(8)

A. El Niño/Southern Oscillation (ENSO) Diagnostic

A transition from La Nina to ENSO neutral is expected in February-April 2026 (60% chance), with ENSO neutral likely persisting through the Northern Hemisphere summer (56% chance in June-August 2026). Please visit the NOAA ENSO Diagnostic webpage for more information.

B. Large Marine Heatwave Tracker

After a small recession in size and coastal intrusion during November 2025, the current marine heatwave has re-expanded and covers much of the US West Coast. Current coastal sea surface temperatures are among the warmest for this time of year ever seen, and have been like this since December, rivaled only by the wintertime anomalies seen during the strongest El Nino on record during 1997-98 and the "Warm Blob" years of 2014-15.

The current heatwave forecast suggests heatwaves will continue through the spring and summer in the offshore regions, with low likelihood of continuing along the coast in the spring. Please visit the NOAA Marine Heatwave Tracker webpage for more information.

C. Habitat Compression Index

Regions 3 and 4, which include the central and southern coast of California, show very high habitat compression (Figures 7 and 8). Conditions contributing to the HCI are below average for this time of year, resulting in high compression. Additionally, the rate of cool habitat accumulation is off to a slow start this year. As a reminder, habitat compression can occur with or without a marine heatwave.

For more information, please visit the NOAA Habitat Compression Index webpage.

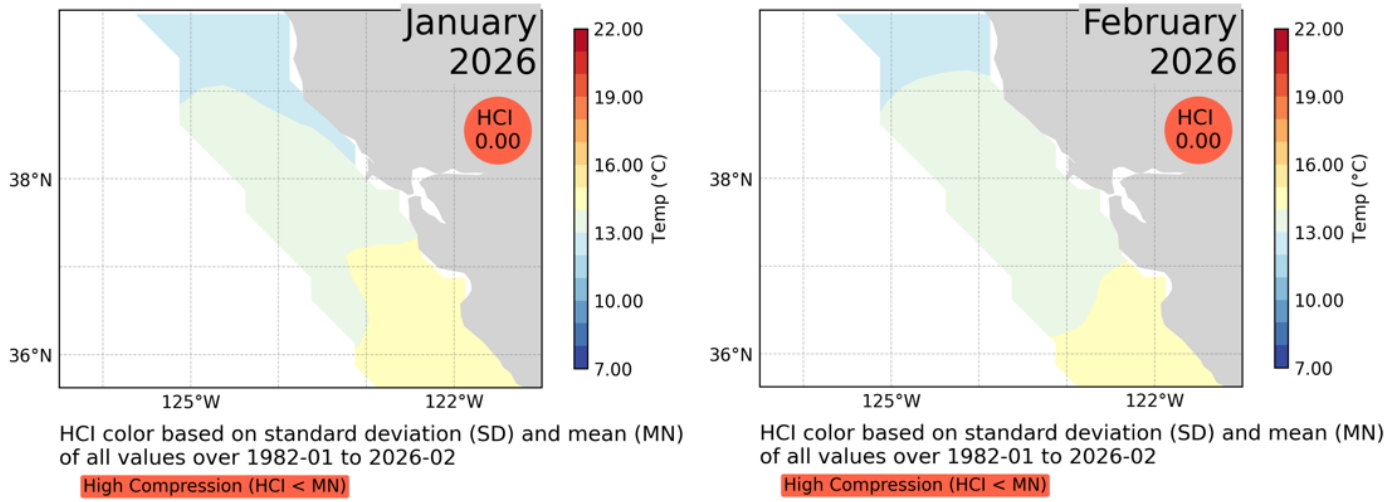

Figure 7. Spatial structure of the Habitat Compression Index (HCI) for Region 3 (35 to 40° N) in January (left) and February (right).

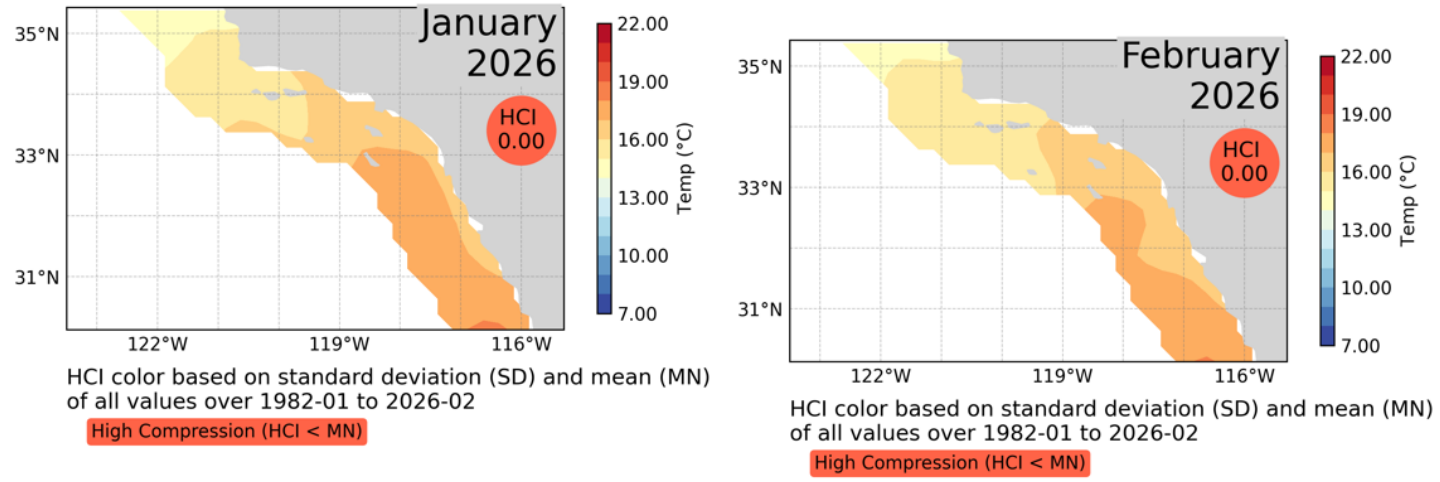

Figure 8. Spatial structure of the Habitat Compression Index (HCI) for Region 4 (30 to 35.5° N) in January (left) and February (right).