



California Department of Fish and Wildlife Final Assessment of Marine Life Entanglement Risk and Management Recommendation for the Risk Assessment Mitigation Program

Date: March 13, 2026

An initial assessment and a preliminary recommendation were 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). The initial assessment was shared with the Working Group on March 10, 2026, and discussed during the Working Group meeting which was held on March 11, 2026. After reviewing all available data and input from the Working Group, Marine Region has prepared a final recommendation. For a map of the RAMP Fishing Zones, see the [Whale Safe Fisheries webpage](#).

I. 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.

II. Management Recommendation Summary Rationale

For the commercial fishery, Marine Region's final 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 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 consideration 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 the [March 10, 2026 Available Data document](#).

III. 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.