

## Whale deaths result in Canada's snow crab fishery losing MSC certification

Canada's East Coast snow crab fishery has had its sustainable catch certification suspended by the Marine Stewardship Council, the organization announced on 20 March. Until another audit occurs in October 2018, some Maritime snow crab will not be able to display the MSC label.

The suspension is directed to the crab fishery in Area 12, Sub-Areas 12E and 12F, which is the bulk of the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence below the St. Laurentian Channel, and Area 19 off the West Coast of Cape Breton. Snow crab from other parts of Atlantic Canada are not included in the suspension.

The certification suspension is the result of incidents involving the deaths of 13 North Atlantic right whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in 2017. Necropsies showed that three of the whales died as the result of entanglement with crab gear. The audit also found that of a further five live entanglements, four were with crab gear.

Philip Hamilton, a research scientist at the Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life at the New England Aquarium, described last summer as the perfect storm when it came to right whale mortality. The whales appeared in waters where they have never been before and during a fishing season when there were more crab pots and rope in the water.

Peter Norsworthy, executive director of the Affiliation of Seafood Producers Association of Nova Scotia (ASPANS), said 2017 was an extraordinary year.

“It was a longer fishery last year because the quota was higher than it had ever been. So it took a lot longer to execute the fishery than it normally would. Normally, 75 percent of the catch is landed within the first three weeks. This year, the quota is going to be down to normal levels, about 25,000 tonnes vs last year's 43,000 tonnes. So we fully expect it will be caught in a normal time period and finish by the end of May,” Norsworthy said. “Hopefully, with an earlier start we'll get most of the fishing completed before the whales show up, if they show up again.”

Norsworthy said fishermen were unsure what the certification suspension will mean to individual fishermen in terms of catch prices. He said they will wait to see “how the market responds.”

“I think most buyers realize 2017 was an unusual circumstance and are fairly well-informed about what activities are being undertaken [to protect the whales],” he said.

Northsorthy noted that within hours of the MSC certification suspension, Canada’s Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) posted a statement on its website “promising further measures in the coming weeks around monitoring, surveillance, management measures and whale rescue efforts.”

“Those will be the key things from them as to how they try and manage around the issue this year,” Northsorthy said.

In January, the DFO announced some new measures for the Gulf snow crab fishery, including a reduction in rope use, color-specific rope for traceability, numbered buoys and immediate reporting of lost gear, and promised more. DFO Minister Dominic LeBlanc said the new rules would be “very aggressively” enforced.

One area of lengthy discussion between fishermen and regulators is rope strength, Norsworthy said.

“There was a prior study done talking about 1700-pound breaking strength, but given that we can be hauling more than that in one pot that isn’t practical in this fishery,” he said. “There is a proposal to the Atlantic Fisheries Fund, which is managed by DFO and the provinces, from the groups of affected New Brunswick fishermen to test weak-link technologies, document what the breaking strength of the current ropes are and look at alternative technologies like pop-up buoys and that sort of thing. So when that proposal is approved, and I certainly hope it is, it will kick off a multi-year research program into all the various technologies.”

Norsworthy said a new proposal, developed in conjunction with researchers from the New England Aquarium and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, will play out further ways the fishery can minimize its impact on the endangered whales.

“I’m quite hopeful that they will have some positive outcomes from that that may change the way we fish in the future,” he said.