

- Mr. Chairman, members, my name is Mike Lucas and I founded North Coast Fisheries in 1993 based on simple concepts of sustainable seafood. Today I am representing the processor members of the California Fisheries and Seafood Institute which includes Caito Fisheries, California Shellfish Company, Pacific Seafood Company, Pier 45 Seafood, Wild Planet, and North Coast Fisheries.
- The health of the Dungeness crab resource has never been an issue due to the way they are harvested and the management of them has always been sound. By harvesting only legal size males this fishery should remain sustainable forever. Dungeness crabs are the largest annual revenue driver for processors and fishers alike. They are our “bread and our butter and our jam”.
- This year’s domoic acid bloom known for centuries as a “red tide” is the largest we have seen. Water conditions were perfect for this algal bloom to occur as it rode the tail of an El Nino weather pattern and stretched along the entire west coast from southern California to Alaska. When this toxic algae bloom takes place everything in the water chain is affected. Red Tides have been around since the days of Moses. Red Tides are nothing new. The main culprit this year is the El Nino which established the perfect weather conditions for a massive bloom to occur.
- The fishing industry was stood on its head this year as our most dependable season was brought to a screeching halt just before it was to open. Domoic acid levels were detected and found to be high, delays were enacted and new rules were formed. All parties were deeply concerned and proactively and hand- in-hand we all worked to assure that public safety came first. We rallied together, industry and regulators alike. We tested, retested, and sat idle for what we thought might be days waiting for results that would allow us to return to sea. In January we had one clean test. We got our hopes up, but the second test, which was required to be clear, came back with a high rated crab and again kept us shut out. Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months. And plants, packers, processors who make up the infrastructure to sustain a productive crab season must keep employees at the ready the entire time. We unlike fishers pay employees the entire delay time so that when the season does start we have the crews to process the volumes of crab. These major expenses do not go away despite the lack of revenue on our side.

- We watched the most lucrative and historic markets of the year evaporate: Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, Super bowl, Chinese New Year, and Lent disappear- all went crab-less. Small amounts of Oregon and Washington crab tried to take advantage of the market gap in California but mostly fell flat, as consumers avoided crab they believed to be poisoned. Crab feeds which are a tradition in Northern California, were severely cut back or in many cases cancelled altogether. These feeds are the largest fund raisers of the year for most groups, while also the most profitable sector for local processors.
- When our season was finally announced to be March 28th almost 5 months late we faced an ethical dilemma. We are true environmentalists; nobody has more at stake in being a steward of the resource than processors and fishers. We have never seen an opening so late in a year and we were deeply concerned that the crabs would be on the clutch (spawning) or in pre-molt where they grow a second shell before the outer carapace sheds off. In either scenario, the crab would be of poor quality and not marketable, but our primary concern was protecting the Dungeness crab population for future seasons. We requested a quality check prior to setting thousands of traps upon a resource that could be extremely vulnerable.
- Recent studies have shown and proven that fishing when crab are molting and have soft shells resulted in mortality rates of 30% or more, despite being handled much more gently in a study scenario than they would be in a commercial fishery. We are of the belief that a 30% or better mortality rate is not an acceptable number and as such we ask the department to consider a season that takes this clutch/molt cycle into account. A fishing season from November 15th through April would allow 5-6 months of fishing and would end fishing when crabs need the break and may be vulnerable. As a bonus it would also clear gear from the waters prior to salmon fishing and prior to the whales' returning migration route.

- In conclusion to this season we have learned much. Some newly discovered issues we can control or help with, and some we cannot. We would like the season to be considered in regards to timing and look to avoid fishing through soft shell conditions. We also would like the department to have the flexibility to be able to call for a quality test past the January 15th cutoff in the case of an unforeseen event such as what occurred this year. We would ask that that quality test be allowed prior to official opening of commercial fishing action.
- We would like this disaster to be recognized as exactly what it is. It was a perfect storm scenario where an El Nino weather pattern aided a Red Tide and the crabs, the fishers, the processors, and the consumers got caught in the crosshair. That said we have some excellent people who have pulled together, stood together, fought, cried, and suffered together. We cannot be made completely whole by the pending disaster relief efforts but many of us can be saved. There have been boats lost, families split, homes lost and communities have suffered. The pending disaster relief efforts will go a long way to help aid those who have suffered as a result of a season mostly lost. We want to thank Chairman McGuire, Vice Chair Wood, committee members, and Tom Weseloh for supporting us, for initiating efforts leading to the Governor declaring the crab season an unmitigated disaster. We thank Director Bonham and his staff for facing the challenges only our industry can deliver. The industry strongly urges your counterparts in congress lawmakers who too have stood with us thus far to hang onto the ball and finish the game. We need a federal disaster bill passed and monies appropriated to heal as individuals, families, related businesses, and as communities. Thank you for the time and opportunity to speak on behalf of the processing community today.