

Economy pushes fishers to go solo

By JANE PALMER

Herald Staff Writer

Commercial crab fishing starts Sunday, and Monterey Harbormaster Steve Scheiblaue is more concerned than ever about the dangers posed to fishermen.

Financial hardship is forcing many fishermen to fish alone because they can no longer afford crew members, Scheiblaue said. Going solo adds greater risk to an already perilous endeavor, he said.

"Commercial fishing is the most dangerous profession in the United States," Scheiblaue said. "It is even more dangerous than being a police officer or a firefighter."

On Nov. 3, David Kubiak, a Morro Bay fisherman well-known in Monterey, died when he was fishing

Please see **Dangers** page A7

Dangers

From page A1

alone. Last year, Tommy Joe Jones of Moss Landing died in similar circumstances.

The lack of a salmon season in recent years has put fishermen under severe financial pressure, Scheiblaue said. Sometimes that means fishermen, eager to make up their losses, will take more risks during crab season, he said.

"The actual physical dangers on the boat are the same as they have been since the beginning of crabbing," said Rick Sullivan of Moss Landing, who has been crab fishing for almost 30 years. "But the

economics might mean people are doing things they wouldn't normally do."

Getting caught in netting, falling overboard and capsizing boats aren't new risks. But when fishing solo, the chances of surviving such mishaps become slimmer, Scheiblaue said.

"All of us who fish locally, fish alone once or twice a year when the weather is good," Sullivan said. "But even when the weather is good, things happen then too — there are dangers everywhere you look."

Fishermen may now feel pressure to harvest their pots even in stormy seas, Scheiblaue said.

The first two weeks of the crabbing season can be the most dangerous, Sullivan said. Boats are laden with

pots, making them susceptible to rolling over.

"Our traps weigh 100 pounds apiece, and you start stacking 50, 60 traps on the back of your boat and all of a sudden you have 5,000 pounds above gravity and the boats are just not very stable," Sullivan said.

Earlier this year, Benson Nguyen, 46, of Marina died fishing for crab when his 36-foot boat, the Della C, capsized. Most of the crab-related deaths and accidents happen in boats smaller than 40 feet, Sullivan said.

Rising fuel prices play their part.

"Let's say a guy goes out and he runs 30 miles to his crab pots and the weather comes up," Sullivan said. "He may actually choose to stay and run his gear just

because to go home and burn that fuel will cost him another \$200."

Meager savings and increasing costs have led many fishermen to get out of the industry, Scheiblaue said. The Monterey harbor has only 40 percent of the commercial boats that were there just two years ago, he said.

"Fishing on the Central Coast is most certainly biologically sustainable, but it is not economically sustainable," Scheiblaue said.

Sullivan states it more simply.

"Just about everything has gone up except for the price of crab."

Jane Palmer can be reached at tipalmer@ucsc.edu.