



Main Menu

- [Home](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Careers](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Industry Trends](#)
- [Job Openings & Info](#)
- [Unemployment Rates](#)
- [Wages & Income](#)
- [Green Info](#)
- [Publications](#)
- [Español](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Twitter](#)

Data Tools

- [Occupations](#)
- [Employment & Labor Force](#)
- [Business & Employers](#)
- [Education](#)
- [WIRED](#)

[SHARE](#) 

In Cod (And Crab!) We Trust - Oregon's Seafood Processing Industry

by *Erik A Knoder*

Published Aug-16-2013

Oregon has about two dozen employers and 1,200 employees turning slimy fish and armored crustaceans into succulent seafood ready for cooking. Commercial fishers landed about 307 million pounds of fish and shellfish

in Oregon in 2012, nearly 80 pounds per Oregonian. This haul had a dockside value of \$128 million, making 2012 the second-best year of the past decade. Fishermen sold a small portion of the harvest off their vessels or at markets directly to consumers. Most, however, was sold to processors and buyers who then exported or sold to wholesalers, retailers, restaurants, and consumers.

[Employment Trends in Seafood Processing](#)
[Other Processors](#)
[Out-of-State Opportunities](#)

The seafood processing industry - part of the manufacturing sector - includes businesses that clean, freeze, can, smoke, salt and dry seafood. It also includes firms that shuck and pack shellfish. Although Oregon currently doesn't have any, it also would include processor ships that do these operations at sea. Except for certain fishermen licensed to sell fresh fish from their boats, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife requires commercial fishers to sell their harvest to licensed wholesale fish dealers or licensed fish buyers. Many of these dealers and buyers are also processors.

In 2012, Oregon exported \$9.6 million worth of seafood directly to other countries. Canada is by far the leading destination. Seafood exports are growing; Oregon exported \$11.8 million of seafood in the first four months of 2013. Crustaceans, mostly crab, accounted for about half the exports.

A major trend within the seafood processing industry is consolidation. Oregon has lost six business units in the processing industry since 2000 - a drop of nearly 20 percent. The industry's consolidation goes hand in hand with the geographic consolidation in the Oregon fishing fleet. Three ports: Astoria, Newport and Charleston, had almost 96 percent of all commercial fish landings by volume in Oregon in 2012. Smaller ports like Garibaldi, Depoe Bay, and Florence struggle to find money for infrastructure, dredging, and jetty maintenance that can attract vessel owners and seafood processors.

Employment Trends in Seafood Processing

The seafood processing industry fared relatively well during the Great Recession.

Employment dipped in one year (2009), but otherwise has been mostly growing since 2004. The industry shrank rapidly during the high-tech recession of 2001 to 2002. Seafood processing shed about 200 jobs, from 1,213 in 2000 to 1,002 in 2002. A period of slow growth followed, but employment has increased more rapidly the past couple years - up 20 percent since 2009. Employment in 2012 was back to the same level as in 2000. This may not sound like much of an accomplishment, but Oregon lost more than 53,000 jobs from all manufacturing businesses during the same period.

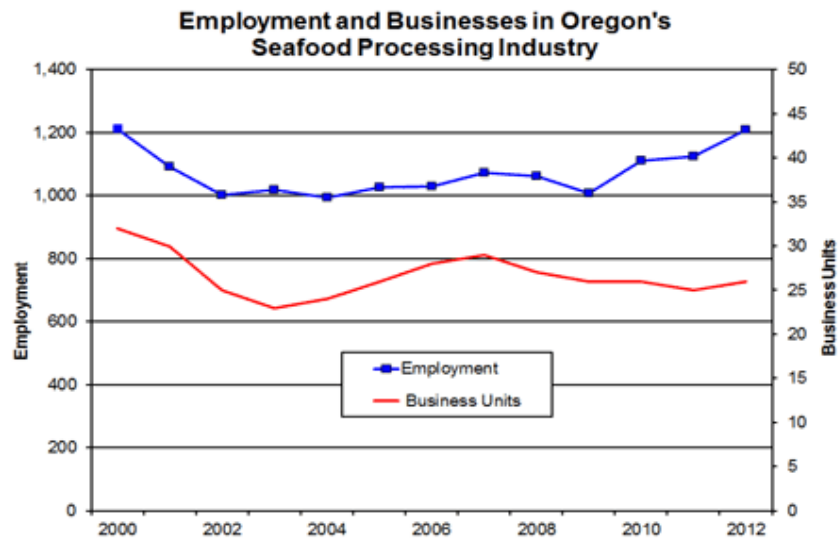
Employment in seafood processing tends to be fairly seasonal. It peaks in midsummer and hits its low point in March. Much of the industry's employment depends directly on when fish are landed. This in turn depends on weather, ocean conditions, fish life cycles, and regulations, especially those established by the Pacific Fishery Management Council. This council has the authority to open and close many fisheries important to Oregon.

The summer employment peak coincides not only with better fishing weather, but increased availability of fish. Sardines, tuna, salmon, and especially Pacific whiting, are all available in the summer. Pacific whiting, also called hake, is typically Oregon's largest fishery by volume. More than 107 million pounds were landed in 2012. (On the other hand, because it was plentiful it fetched only 14 cents per pound when landed.) Whiting is used to make surimi, which in turn is used to make imitation "crab" or "lobster" meat. Manufacturing surimi requires a good deal of very controlled processing and rapid cleaning and handling of the fish. This means that surimi processors must hire many seasonal employees.

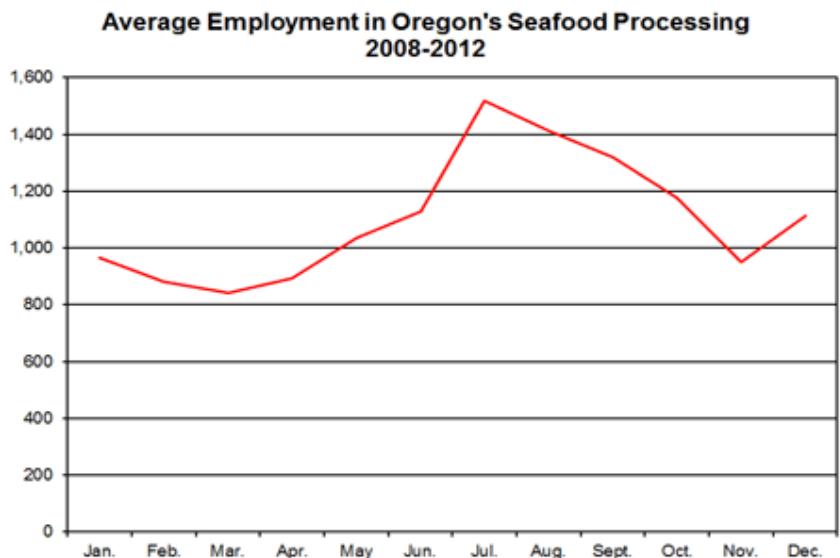
Another, smaller, peak in seafood processing employment typically occurs in December and January. Although the weather is often dangerously bad at this time, December is usually the beginning of the Dungeness crab harvest. Crab is Oregon's most valuable single fishery. About 8.6 million pounds were landed in 2012 - a poor year. In contrast to inexpensive whiting, Dungeness crab fetched about \$3.35 per pound. Only salmon had a higher average price among Oregon's major fisheries in 2012. The crab harvest is a derby fishery; it's first come, first served as boats and crews race to scoop up as much as they can before someone else does. The result is a glut of crab landing on processors' docks that must be cleaned, cooked, picked, and frozen in short order. Seasonal employees allow processors to get through the short-lived crab bonanza.

The skill requirements are modest for many seafood processing jobs. Line jobs are generally entry level. Applicants often must pass a drug screening test and a criminal background check. The work is often 12-hour shifts, seven days per week during the busy seasons. Overtime is a part of the job and the base pay is usually minimum wage. Other jobs, such as truck drivers and quality inspectors, require more skill and pay more.

Graph 1



Graph 2



Other Processors

Oregon has a number of businesses that handle and process seafood aside from the major processors. If seafood processing is a sideline for a business, it may be counted in another industry because businesses are categorized according to their main operation. There are a handful of oyster farms along the coast that shuck and package oysters, although their main business is farming the oysters. Oregon Oyster Farms in Newport and Clausen Oysters in North Bend grow oysters and ship them worldwide.

Other firms that distribute seafood or sell wholesale or retail may also do some processing. The Garibaldi Cannery on Tillamook Bay is one such multi-purpose firm. The company does processing, buying, and retail and helps keep the port at Garibaldi an active fishing port. Small firms are more common for salmon and albacore tuna. The websites for the Oregon Albacore Commission and the Oregon Salmon Commission each list several dozen firms that handle these seafood products and provide canned, frozen, and fresh fish.

Seafood processing is also one way fishers can add value to their product and help

develop their local economy. Newport fisherman Herb Goblirsch started Oregon's Choice Gourmet Albacore 34 years ago to can and market his albacore tuna harvest directly to consumers. Today several dozen fishers are processing and directly marketing their catch.

One such fishing family is Doug and Muriel Moore of Newport, who started Sea Star Enterprise. Doug bought his commercial fishing boat in 1989 and started processing some of his own catch in 2000. Sea Star Enterprise began by selling directly to restaurants then expanded to selling at farmers' markets and from their vessel. They sell primarily fresh and frozen tuna and salmon, but also offer canned product. Maintaining sanitary conditions and proper handling to ensure the highest possible quality of product is the Moore's main mission. A primary concern for Doug is that poor handling of fish by some fisher/processors will lead to contaminated products and regulations that may burden all small processors. Doug and Muriel both stress the importance of having consumers know and use only reliable sources when buying fish directly.

Out-of-State Opportunities

Some seafood processors recruit Oregonians to work in out-of-state plants, primarily in Alaska during the summer months. A review of Oregon Employment Department job listings in June showed about 50 job listings with five different companies. Companies such as Trident Seafoods, Signature Seafoods, and Ocean Beauty routinely recruit employees for their Alaska operations. Although the jobs may be listed in Oregon, out-of-state jobs don't count as official Oregon employment and are not included in this analysis.

The Alaska processing work is similar to that in Oregon: few skill or experience requirements, working on a processing line, 12- to 16-hour days, seven days per week. The difference is the geographic isolation. Many Alaska facilities are in remote locations and employees live in dormitory style housing in company towns.

Oregon Employment Department

WorkSource Oregon - Oregon.gov - [Privacy](#) / [Accessibility](#) - [PRISM](#) - [Need Help?](#)