

The dangers of fishing off the Oregon Coast



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At one point, you may have heard us say, “The seas have calmed, allowing us to get back out on the water.” And you probably thought, “Isn’t that typical of the ocean?” The short answer is yes, several factors affect the navigability of the ocean, quickly and most notably:

- Wind. Wind blows along the surface of the water, creating friction. The stronger the wind blows, the greater the friction, and thus, the larger the waves. Generally speaking, winds between 15-25 knots start to become uncomfortable and will quickly dictate direction for you—less than ideal when fishing for lingcod in a very specific location.
- Swell. An ocean swell is formed by the combination of wind strength, duration, and fetch. Wind strength is how fast the wind blows across the ocean’s surface. Wind duration is how long it blows without interruption. Fetch is the distance wind blows across the ocean’s surface without disruption from obstacles like landmasses, large boats, etc. Over time and distance, sustained wind strength and duration build up a large amount of energy beneath the ocean’s surface, forming deeper waves—also

known as swells. A swell can travel thousands of miles without changing height or shape. Unsurprisingly, large swells are undesirable as they can easily capsize boats. And from what we hear, a capsized boat makes it extremely difficult to fish.

Wind and swell will affect ocean fishing conditions anywhere in the world, but on top of these two factors, Northern Oregonian anglers must also contend with the “seven-fanged horror” that is the Columbia River Bar—the three-mile-wide point where the 1,200-mile-long Columbia River violently collides with the Pacific Ocean.

Most great rivers that rival the Columbia’s expanse have a delta where collected sediment—desert sand, volcanic ash, rich topsoil, etc.—creates a small, flat landmass where the river water slows before ambling into the ocean. Not the Columbia. Without the presence of a mitigating delta, the Columbia rushes full-speed into the Pacific with fire hydrant-force.

Okay, so there’s no delta, but what creates the horror show that is the Columbia River Bar?

Three factors, two of which should be familiar by this point: First, about 35 miles offshore, the sea bottom at the famed Astoria Canyon abruptly drops 3,000 feet below sea level—that’s a little over a half mile. That’s a very big change within a very short distance.

The second factor is wind. Remember when we said strong wind causes strong friction which causes large waves? That’s exactly what’s happening here: Strong Chinook winds from the North blow toward the Oregon Coast with gusts reaching up to 80 mph.

The third factor? Swells, specifically long distance swells traveling from Japan, Hawaii, Alaska, and Chile. The combination of strong winds, no delta to break up those onshore swells, and the abrupt change in seafloor can, and often do, wreak havoc for any boater attempting to penetrate the Pacific’s incorrigible gate.

Michael Haglund, author of *World’s Most Dangerous: A History of the Columbia River Bar, Its Pilots and Their Equipment*, famously described the Bar as “the most dangerous entrance to a commercial waterway in the world.”

So why even try?

In a word? Adventure. In another word? Satisfaction. Federated Seafood’s Captain Sam Shragge says, “I like the adventure. I like the thrill; everything from the morning before to the off-season.” He adds, “I’m a very small part of the food network, but if more people care about where their food comes from, we’ll be able to solve a lot of the world’s problems. I get satisfaction knowing people are eating high-quality, local fish.”

While Federated Seafood is fishing off the southern Oregon Coast—about 200 miles from the treacherous Columbia River Bar—the southern estuaries face similar conditions, and

thus pose similar threats. Further reflecting on his personal motivation, Captain Shragge concludes, “At the end of the day I often think to myself, ‘That was wild.’ And I’ve never once thought it wasn’t worth it.”