Fishermen look for ways to conserve fuel

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Fuel is going up, and commercial fishermen in the Bristol Bay area say that could change how they operate.

“It’s going to alter how people behave on the Nushugak,” commercial fisherman Mike Davis said.

As a setnet fisherman, Davis said he’d feel the pain of fuel prices less keenly, because setnet fishing doesn’t require as much running up and down the bay as does driftnet fishing.

But even setnetters are trying to figure how they can take a lesser hit from the impact of fuel prices on their business, he said.

“I think some setnet fishermen in the area are probably running four-cycle, vs. two-cycle, engines because they’re more fuel efficient,” Davis said. “I know a guy who was trying to decide whether to buy a 115 or a 90 Yamaha, and he sat down and calculated how much more fuel you’d burn an hour, and decided, “I’m getting the 90. I don’t really need the 115.”

Driftnet fishermen are in another boat, however. Driftnet fishing requires putting down nets, drifting down the bay, and...
then starting the process over again. It also means making longer runs to the tenders for fuel and to store fish, something the setnet fishermen don’t do as much because the tenders stay close by.

Drift and set isn’t just about technique; the boat setups and equipment are entirely different, and one can’t just switch from one method to the other.

All that running around has some driftnet fishermen thinking about how they can reduce the number of trips they take.

Tom Beck, a driftnet fisherman who’s fished for sockeye in Bristol Bay since he was 10 years old, said fishermen might also consider traveling more slowly — closer to the six-knot speeds that boats are most fuel efficient at — and investing in smaller fuel injectors to increase engine fuel efficiency.

But those things could also cost fishermen in time and money, he said.

Beck said he expects his fuel costs to be around $10,000 this season, based on an estimated $5 per gallon.

“It’s not so bad for me, because I’m only burning about 7-1/2 gallons per hour,” Beck said. “But a lot of these guys are burning 10, 15 gallons per hour.”

Fish processors buy commercial fishermen’s catch and also supply fuel to them.

Representatives from Bristol Bay area processors Snopac, Peter Pan and Icicle all said that, as of Friday, June 13, they still don’t know what the price of fuel is going to be.

“Let’s hope for the best,” Snopac Vice President Norman Van Vactor said. “But the best is ugly in this case.”

Snopac has a fleet in Bristol Bay of about 65 boats, he said, and the majority of those run on diesel. He said he expects to have a better idea of what fuel is going to cost this season at the beginning of the week of Sunday, June 15.

As for how higher fuel prices will impact the industry, Van Vactor said it’s hard to predict.

“We still don’t know the full ramifications. I think like in any business, when times are tight the tough survive,” he said.

Van Vactor said he thought there might be fewer commercial fishermen working longer in the season in the hopes that scratch fishing — end-of-season salmon runs with smaller numbers of fish — will be good.

Tom Musgrove, a driftnetter who’s commercial fished in Bristol Bay since 1986, said he thinks fishermen might be likelier to stay put instead of chasing after a large group of fish they hear about over the radio this season. He said other things might change about driftnetters’ strategies as well.

“Typically I’ll go out to the south line, sit on the south line and drift up with it,” he said. “Then go back to the south line and keep repeating that to get open net. I could see a lot more guys maybe make it that once and set, but keep drifting up on the bay instead of running back.”

Musgrove said he can more easily afford the higher fuel prices because he’s one of the higher producers in Bristol Bay.

“It’s just going to cut back on how much we take home,” he said. “These guys that are not doing as well, it’s going to have a lot more effect on them.”

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