Fuel prices making fishermen crabby
Some fishermen hoping to just break even

By Klas Stolpe
For the CCW

PETERSBURG, Alaska - It is not as easy for commercial fishermen to bike to work as people working in other trades - especially when carrying crab pots that weigh up to 500 pounds, seine nets and your office has a 360-degree ocean view.

With few options to cut back on fuel expenses, Alaskan fishermen are trying to stay untied at the dock and undaunted on the sea as diesel fuel approaches the $5 mark. What is already considered one of the toughest jobs in the world is getting harder due to financial strains.

"These are my profits," Petersburg gill-netter and crab fisherman Nels Otness III said, as he poured fuel into the Fishing Vessel Halli Lynn. "(The cut into profits) are many of our ... babies' shoes or bread and milk. But we can't not fish, we have to do something."

About eight hours away, the Icicle Seafoods tender F/V Frigidland is at anchor awaiting deliveries of Dungeness crab. Over three days, a small group of boats will come along side and offload its catch to avoid the expenditure of extra time and money on a dockside delivery.

"This is more of a courtesy from us to them," Frigidland captain Ladd Norheim said.

A tender is commissioned per pound of product hauled back to the company plant, plus fuel. This makes it much easier for processing plants to get more product as fishermen will attempt to stay out longer to save fuel. But the plants also feel the pinch at the pump.

"I'm not making anything to do this, but we just want to show our fleet we care about what they do for us," Norheim said. "This becomes quality time to spend with my son out here, and as long as I can break even..."

Norheim carries groceries, mail, fresh bait - and more importantly fuel - that the various boats had purchased.
earlier but couldn't fit on the vessels. The extra supplies being 'on the grounds' means the fleet won't have to leave work.

"I love my wife!" F/V Seaforth skipper Matt Nilsen exclaimed as he opened a care package from home, displaying a treasure of goodies. "Sure, we would like to be home a bit more but 'home' understands. Hey, crab is $2.25 a pound. I'd rather spend that hauling and moving pots around than taking a wheel watch."

Family fishing operations like F/V Liahona owner and operator Kirt Marsh and his youthful crew of sons - Steven, Evan and Preston - fill the boat's food stash with moose, bear, and deer throughout the year. Many others skippers, such as F/V Jane B captain Shannon Vandervest and daughter Chelsea Berg, captain of the F/V Ginny Sue, have begun marketing their gillnet-caught salmon themselves.

Salmon troller Frank Freeman used the services of Petersburg-based Pacific Wing aircraft to fly his fresh catch from the deck of the F/V Betsy M into market.

With his king salmon fetching $10 per pound and fuel well over $4, the approximate cost of a $800 charter still kept him 'afloat,' so to speak, or at least breaking even. It is estimated that 25-30 percent of commercial fishermen will operate in the red this season and some will teeter towards bankruptcy. For some, breaking even will be considered a nice haul. Fishermen are doing more, though, to conserve every drop of fuel they can.

Throttles are being dropped from 1600 to 1400 RPM. Flow meters are attached to engines showing how much fuel is burning at any time (finding the maximum fuel speed efficiency). And "catching the ride" is becoming more important, as the increase of just two knots can extend a gallon of fuel an extra two miles per hour. Some vessels have attached Bulbous bows below the water line to reduce wave resistance while sailing, thus increasing performance.

And then there are Sara and Ray Stoner, who are taking a political approach to ensure fishermen can survive by seeking the same type of government aid that has helped crop farmers through tough times.

While Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, has introduced legislation to provide commercial fishermen a temporary income tax credit to help offset the high cost of fuel (Fisheries Fuel Tax Relief Act of 2008); and Gov. Sarah Palin has asked the state Legislature to offer low-interest loans to local fishermen to purchase fuel-efficient engines; the Stoners started the 1,700 signature petition that made the rounds on docks and coffee shops state wide and ended up on Murkowski's desk.

"The government is helping farmers get through tough times," Sara Stoner commented. "Why is this any different? Alaskan seafood is on tables coast-to-coast (and) around the world. It won't be that way if we can't afford to fish."
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