

# Fishermen left depressed in spill's wake

by Sue Ann Waller  
for the Tundra Times

KODIAK — It's that time of year when Kodiak fishermen should be whistling while they work and telling tall tales of big catches, bad weather and big money.

Not this year. The results of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill go way beyond tar balls and oiled beaches and into the personal lives of the hard-working Kodiak fishermen who are left frustrated, out of work and guessing when the opening for fishing may be.

"Last time they (Alaska Department of Fish and Game) said there would be an opening we took off, got there, sat there, and they ended up canceling it that night. We went there for nothing. Just a waste of time," fisherman Dave Bisbger said.

The biggest frustration for most fishermen is their state of dormancy. The boat harbor, which is usually bare this time of season, is practically full; and many of the fishermen are at home.

"Ordinarily with this many boats in town there would be a lot going on. But there isn't anyone around. Everybody's gone home. The crewmen have left. They're going home to wait. They're going home to bum out," said John Schactler of *F/V Natalia*.

Even though fishermen have been affected by the oil spill ever since the first herring season was shut down in Prince William Sound, some have been lucky. A few have had a good herring season. Some have been tendering in Bristol Bay for the salmon fishery, and even more are under contract with Veco.

Yet, some haven't been so fortunate, and they just don't know what to do. Along with the fishing season being down, so are the morales of the fishing fleet.

Jim Pearson, a Kodiak resident of 46 years and a fisherman on the *Dawn Mist*, attributed the dip in morale to the inactivity.

"Not knowing the answers to questions of when they're going to get paid, or even if they're going to get paid — most people like to be busy doing something," Pearson said.

With the depression, hopes for the future aren't too bright.

"I'm thinking next year's not going to be any good. The fish come back to spawn, and for the ones who are leaving, all they smell is the oil. How are they going to know where to go next year?" Bisbger asked.

Fishermen say they're disgusted with what they feel is ADF&G, the Department of Environmental Conservation, Exxon and Veco's inability to deal with the oil spill and the wrecked fishing season.

Most just want the bureaucratic suspense to end and for the departments to stop playing on an emotional merry-go-round with their way of life.



Boats remain idle in the Kodiak harbor, affecting the lives of commercial fishermen throughout the island.

photo by Sue Ann Waller

"They should just close the whole season and let us go to work somewhere," one fisherman said.

And Bisbger said they should have done that a long time ago.

"Just close the season and send all of the boats out to clean the oil up," he said.

The other fisherman, Schactler, offered his view: "I think the federal government should have jumped in. They should have had all of the fishermen working on it. They should have had the Navy, the Marines and the Army working on it.

"Our armed forces aren't doing anything right now. They should have had everybody, the whole country, working on it. They might have taken care of it."

Yet, some fishermen aren't so critical of Exxon.

"A lot of things could have been done, according to hindsight. But it's all so new; people just didn't know what to do. Exxon is such a big organization. I think they just got bogged down by their own bureaucracies, and they can't do much. . . It's a complicated thing," Pearson said.

Schactler agreed.

"Exxon can only do so much," he said. "It's physically impossible for Exxon to totally clean all of the oil up. Everybody wants them to, but they can't totally clean up 800 to 1,000 miles of beach."

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John Schactler says it's impossible to clean up all of the spilled oil.

photo by Sue Ann Waller