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Alaska Dispatch News

Environment

Abandoned vessels litter Alaska's shorelines while officials work on a fix

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BETHEL -- Rusting relics of industry gone by cut into the banks of a well-traveled slough off the Kuskokwim River, oozing fuel and gradually disintegrating -- a decaying steamboat here, abandoned barges there, even a dismantled tug.

The mess in Steamboat Slough, just a quick boat ride from the Southwest Alaska hub of Bethel, is both menacing and ghostly.

It's an enormous problem, but according to those involved, it remains frustratingly hard to fix. Weak state laws, difficulties with vessel owners, limited jurisdictions and pinched public budgets hamper the effort.

The cost of removing the hundreds of abandoned and derelict vessels littering shorelands around the state is easily in the tens of millions of dollars, say members of a task force trying to turn around the situation.

"Whether that is barges in the Bethel area in Steamboat Slough or fishing vessels in Port Lions on Kodiak Island, or Port Graham in Southeast, if you have this large vessel that may not be seaworthy or may not be economically viable anymore, what do you do with it?" said Steve Russell, interagency coordinator for the state Department of Environmental Conservation and part of the task force. "The answer in the past was you go to X area and just leave it."

In Southeast Alaska, state officials are concerned about renegade float-houses that, far from being abandoned, are people's homes. Some are elaborate and massive structures with satellite dishes and gardens. Yet most float-house residents have failed to secure or even seek necessary permits to park on state shorelands and some are in disrepair and in danger of sinking, according to the state Department of Natural Resources.

Near Bethel, fish camps with drying racks for strips of salmon dot the uplands on both sides of Steamboat Slough, some just a stone's throw from rotting vessels and debris. One barge that sank in the channel two years ago poses year-round danger and is blamed for a December 2013 four-wheeler crash that cost a man almost all his fingers from frostbite.

In Alaska, different agencies have created their own spreadsheets and mini-databases of derelicts, all with different counts and all incomplete.

The Department of Natural Resources has identified 160 derelicts awaiting removal. And the backlog keeps growing, Menefee said.

"That's just ones we have in our internal tracking and it's not a very good tracking system," he said.

DNR is working to create a centralized system.

"We're trying to create a database that's accessible to the Coast Guard, DEC, Corps of Engineers, harbor masters, so we are all working on the same sheet of music," Menefee said.

Two old wooden fishing boats in disrepair that sank near Homer on Christmas 2012 were the catalyst for action, though harbor masters and port administrators had been working on the issue for a few years, said Rachel Lord, clean water program director for the environmental group Cook Inletkeeper.

The Leading Lady and the Kupreanof went down after a heavy snowfall in a spot near Kachemak Bay's prized oyster farms, Lord said. Leaking fuel and lube oils created a sheen, the DEC said in a report at the time.

The U.S. Coast Guard contracted for the old boats to be raised and the fuel to be removed. But once the pollution threat was over, the Coast Guard was done.

Ownership of the fishing boats turned out to be tangled and the process for dealing with them moved in fits and starts.

A year and a half after the sinking, the state paid for one vessel to be demolished. The other was repossessed by the previous owner, who repaid DNR some of its costs, according to a task force case study report. But the Coast Guard never was reimbursed for a bill that Russell said was in the range of \$350,000.

The Legislature in 2013 took up the matter of derelicts for the first time in decades, pushed by state Rep. Paul Seaton, a Republican from Homer with a signature fisherman's cap. The bill passed that year was a first step, Lord said. It extended authority to deal with abandoned and derelict vessels beyond the Department of Transportation to other state agencies as well as municipalities.

The task force, which includes representatives of state and federal agencies, along with the nonprofit environmental group Cook Inletkeeper, started work last year. At a June meeting, Bethel's tribe caught the group's attention with a compelling video of Steamboat Slough to support its pitch for action, Lord said. A comprehensive fix will take time, task force members said.

The group is working on a package of recommendations, but it probably won't be ready until fall 2016, in time for the 2017 legislative session, Menefee said.

Last August, DNR posted trespass notices on 33 abandoned and derelict vessels in the Bethel area, including 21 in Steamboat Slough. It wasn't able to reach two more. The notices gave owners 90 days to either move the vessels or seek permission to legally dock there, said Jusdi McDonald, a natural resource manager at DNR.

But most of the hulks are still there, Menefee said.

Two parties hit with trespass notices have come forward to seek permission, as did another shipping company that may want to park vessels on state shoreland in the future, according to DNR.

The company that DNR says is responsible for more Bethel-area abandoned or derelict vessels than anyone, Faulkner Walsh Constructors, applied for a land-use permit in late June to park seven barges in Steamboat Slough -- just days after Alaska Dispatch News asked about the issue, Menefee said.

Harry Faulkner Jr., an owner of the company, said in an interview before applying for that permit that his vessels were neither derelict nor abandoned. He said he had permission from a private land owner to park four barges, the dismantled tug hull, and two Flexifloats (a brand of modular barge), and asserted that he didn't need state permission. One large gravel barge, the Delta Viking, "is parked until the economy comes back," he said. Another was used to harvest fish when a commercial salmon processor operated in Bethel.

DNR said the vessels are on state-owned shorelands.

Asked what prompted him to apply for permits, Faulkner said in a follow-up email that the company meant to do so earlier but someone in Anchorage failed to send in the paperwork.

DNR can give permission for a vessel to use state shorelands for up to five years. It evaluates each application in terms of public interest and also will give the Bethel community, including fish camp owners, an opportunity to comment, Menefee said. The process can take months. The state can require a bond and reclamation plans.

"It's not a slam dunk that he applied; he's good," Menefee said.

As to the barge, known as Schenk's Ark, sunk in the channel since the spring of 2013, Faulkner said that's not his. He said he only leased it in 2012 and moored it when he was done.

"It didn't sink until the following spring," when the moorings came loose, he said.

Faulkner said he tried to refloat the barge, but he maintains that the owner, David Ausdahl, was responsible, not him. Efforts to reach Ausdahl were unsuccessful.

"Out of the goodness of my company's heart, we went up there for two weeks and tried to raise this barge. And we were not capable of lifting that barge," Faulkner said.