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Nenana Ice Classic Will Have Record Jackpot

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By Fairbanks Daily News-Miner
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FAIRBANKS — The jackpot for the Nenana Ice Classic will be a record \$338,062. Now, it's just a matter of time before a winner — or winners, as is usually the case — is decided.

Ice Classic manager Cherrie Forness announced the jackpot amount for Alaska's richest guessing game following a meeting of the board of directors Monday night in Nenana.

This year's jackpot tops the previous record of \$335,000 by more than \$3,000 and last year's jackpot by more than \$59,000.

Don't ask Forness why, though.

"I have no idea why it's up but I'm happy that it is," Forness said. "It's great news."

It marked the first time in three years the jackpot hit the \$300,000 mark. Last year's jackpot was \$279,030, the second-lowest in more than a decade. In recent years, the payout has shrunk with the economy. While Forness was hoping the jackpot would climb back up to the \$300,000 mark this year, she didn't think it would be a new record.

"I've double-checked my math and triple-checked my math," Forness said. "I was like, 'This can't be right.'"

As it turned out, it wasn't. Forness had calculated the jackpot as more than \$344,000, then revised it downward. Even with the reduction, the jackpot is still more than enough to set a record.

Now in its 94th year, the Ice Classic is one of Alaska's oldest springtime traditions.

Each winter, thousands of Alaskans pay \$2.50 per ticket to guess the date and exact time the Tanana River ice will go out in Nenana, a small town on the Parks Highway 55 miles south of Fairbanks. The winning time is determined when a tripod planted on the ice in March moves far enough to stop a clock it is connected to on shore.

Last year, the ice went out at 9:06 a.m. Alaska Standard Time on April 29. Three winners guessed the correct date and time.

This year, 265,365 tickets were sold at more than 200 locations around the state, mostly bars, mom-and-pop convenience stores and gas stations. That figure is 30,000 more than last year, which translated to an extra \$75,000. “It’s not the highest number of tickets we’ve ever sold, but it is the highest jackpot,” Forness said.

Fifty-one percent of the \$663,412.50 generated by ticket sales went to the jackpot, Forness said. The remaining money is used to pay ticket sorters and other expenses, and a small percentage of ticket revenue is donated to nonprofit organizations in Nenana.

How the jackpot will be divided remains to be seen. The ice on the Tanana River at Nenana was measured on Monday and it was still 39 inches thick. The river is frozen solid from bank to bank, Forness said.

“There’s water on top of the ice but it’s all snowmelt,” she said. “There’s no holes or anything yet.”

Forness predicted it will be “a week and a half anyway” before the ice goes out.

The Nenana River, which flows into the Tanana River about a half-mile downstream from where the tripod is set up, usually goes out about a week before the Tanana.

“It’ll be a couple of days before that happens,” she said of breakup on the Nenana. “We’re just starting to see some water movement there.”

Officials still haven’t hooked up the clock that will be used to determine the winning time, Forness said.

“We’ve got everything run but we just aren’t hooking up the clock yet,” she said. “We won’t hook up the clock until we start seeing water moving. It’s going to be awhile.”

Once the clock is connected, a guard will stand watch 24 hours a day until the ice goes out.

Contact staff writer Tim Mowry at 459-7587.

Big Paydays

Here is a list of the five largest payouts in the 94-year-old Nenana Ice Classic.

2011 — \$338,062

2000 — \$335,000

1995 — \$330,008

2001 — \$308,000

2002 — \$304,000