

# AIS in Placentia Bay: Success But So Far, Little Traction

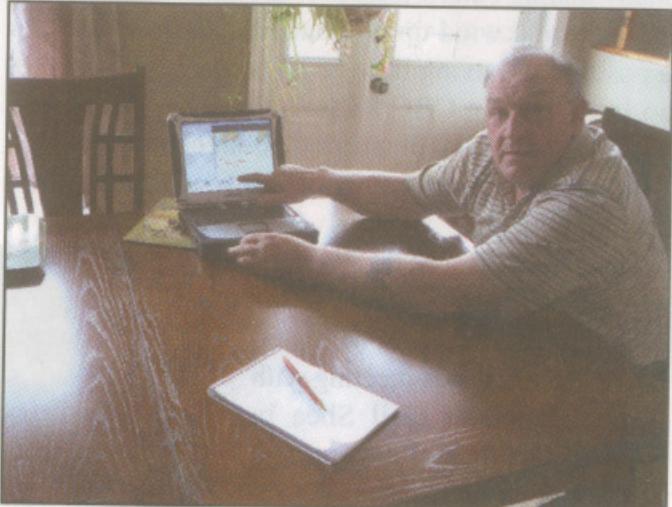
By Andrew Safer

Morris Fudge, 63, of Burin fished for 45 years before getting an Automatic Identification System (AIS) installed on his boat, and now he says he wouldn't go out on the water without one.

AIS establishes the vessel's position using GPS and transmits this and other vessel information via transponder while also receiving such information from all the other AIS-equipped vessels within radio range—typically 20 miles.

Fudge is one of five fishermen who participated in an AIS implementation project in 2006-2007 which was undertaken in conjunction with the launch of the SmartBay ocean observing system in Placentia Bay. The Fisheries and Marine Institute of Newfoundland underwrote the cost and arranged for the installation of AISs on eight vessels in order to demonstrate the importance of situational awareness to both the smaller boat operators and oil tankers. The other three vessels fitted with AISs belong to a charterer, the RCMP, and the Marine Institute.

The information that the AIS transmits includes: vessel name, MMSI number, call sign, latitude and longitude, course over ground, speed over ground, estimated time of arrival, navigation status (underway or anchored), destination, length, beam, type of ship,



Morris Fudge

type of cargo, IMO number, and draft.

All tankers and commercial vessels that are over 300 metric tonnes must carry AIS, so it's optional for practically all fishing vessels operating out of Placentia Bay.

"Once I leave Burin," said Fudge, "I know every boat that's out there and I can tell which way they're going. It's almost impossible to go ashore or run into something. It's one of the best pieces of navigation I've seen since I started."

Fudge, who retired late last year, has been singing the praises of AIS to his colleagues on the Placentia Bay Traffic Committee for the last three years.

Earl Johnson, 59, of North Harbour had AIS installed on the 35-foot catamaran he uses to catch cod and crab. He has been fishing professionally with his brother Oakley since 1976. "Here in Placentia Bay, we deal with a lot of oil tankers and fishing near the traffic lanes," he said. "The more they know where we are, and the more we know where they are, the better for everybody."

Before AIS, Johnson recalls having to keep a much stricter watch on the radar and VHF. If he saw a radar target, he'd have to call Placentia Traffic to find out

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what was in the area. Today, he checks the AIS in the wheelhouse every now and then, which means "we can focus more on our livelihood." When he sees a target, he knows right away it's an oil tanker, and the system enables him to communicate directly. "They'll say, 'We see you on our AIS. We know you're there. Go to port or go to starboard.' So far, there's been no problem whatsoever with tankers." Johnson added that he's heard that some other fishermen have had close quarters with tankers.

About a dozen fishermen have inquired about AIS over the past year, reported Con Dunphy, Branch Manager of Atlantic Electronics Limited in Mount Pearl, but they haven't started to buy.

"There's a definite awareness of AIS amongst the fishermen in Placentia Bay," said Dunphy who has been supplying and servicing marine electronic equipment to the fishing and commercial shipping industries for 34 years. "They've been on the water 25 to 35 years and they've been seeing tankers and commercial traffic in the bay like never before." Dunphy has noticed a tendency towards minimum crewing, with the economics reducing the crew size on a longliner from five to four. "That means there's one less guy to be looking out," he observed, "and that impacts on your navigation responsibilities," strengthening the case for AIS.

"It's easy for one of the big tankers to lose a small fishing boat in sea clutter, which is a big danger," he said. "But if you have AIS it doesn't matter what the sea or weather conditions are." He added there's another reason to improve situational awareness: some tankers and commercial ships can steam faster than six knots and overtake a fishing vessel, making a collision from behind possible.

Bruce Forsey who owns South Coast Electronics in Grand Bank (Fortune Bay) has been servicing the marine electronics sector for 20 years. He can't recall any AIS requests from fishermen, but "has a feel-

ing that, down the road, it's going to be compulsory because it's the greatest thing ever for safety at sea."

So why aren't fishermen buying AIS?

"The biggest incentive for any fisherman to buy something is if it's going to make them more money," said Neil Chaulk, president of ICAN Ltd., which partnered with the SmartBay initiative on the AIS installations. ICAN integrated a commercially available AIS with the company's Aldebaran electronic chart software. "Lives come second to making money," Chaulk added.

Cost has also been a factor, but Dunphy said that is changing. Currently, prices range from an IMO-approved unit for \$4,500 to a "black box" that only receives information from other vessels for \$1,100. He said he is in the process of locating a class B AIS, which would both send and receive, at a price point in the \$1,300 to \$1,400 range.

Some fishermen are waiting for someone else to pay for the units, suggested Dunphy. He recalled that the Hibernia Management & Development Company Ltd. subsidized the majority of the cost of having 27 radar units installed on fishing boats in Trinity Bay when the Hibernia platform was

being built in Bull Arm.

"No one has come forward to support the further implementation of AIS in the bay beyond the SmartBay demonstration project," said Bill Carter, SmartBay project manager and manager of ocean observation for the School of Ocean Technology at the Marine Institute. "Any mariner operating within existing traffic lanes in Placentia Bay should definitely be carrying AIS, whether it's a carriage requirement or not. The cost should now be within the monetary realities of pretty well any fisherman out there. Situation awareness should be everybody's responsibility."

*Andrew Safer is a writer and communications consultant in St. John's.* †