

BOATS & GEAR

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A SALMON'S VIEW of the Chris K shows a gillnetter that hits 40 knots when the power from a pair of 450-hp diesels and twin waterjets kick in.

JENNIFER KARUZA PHOTOS

ONE MAN'S DREAM BOAT

After 50 years spent working Bristol Bay, Alaska fisherman Nick Wahl finally gets the gillnetter that he's always wanted.

BY JENNIFER KARUZA

The forecast for salmon returns to Bristol Bay for the 2001 season may be 40 percent lower than the previous 10-year mean, and price predictions may be a bit gloomy, but one Bristol Bay fisherman has a big reason to smile this year.

Nick Wahl, 66, rallied All American Marine in Ferndale, Wash., to build his dream boat — a 32' x 14' aluminum bow picker — in spite of the poor projections. Valued at \$205,000, the Chris K was designed by Wahl and Pat Pitsch, owner of All American Marine.

Launched on March 21, the Chris K will fish the Bristol Bay salmon and herring fisheries. (She was barged from Seattle to Alaska, and arrived just in time for the herring fishery at the end of April.)

This is the sixth boat Wahl has owned, and the fourth he's had custom built. His previous boats include stern-picking gillnetters and combination gillnetters and herring seiners for Bristol Bay. The Chris K is Wahl's first bowpicker — and with its speed, enclosed top house and waterjet propulsion to bring him into shallow areas, it's the boat that he's always desired.

Wahl's wife, Eunice, told him that if he wanted to build this boat, he'd have



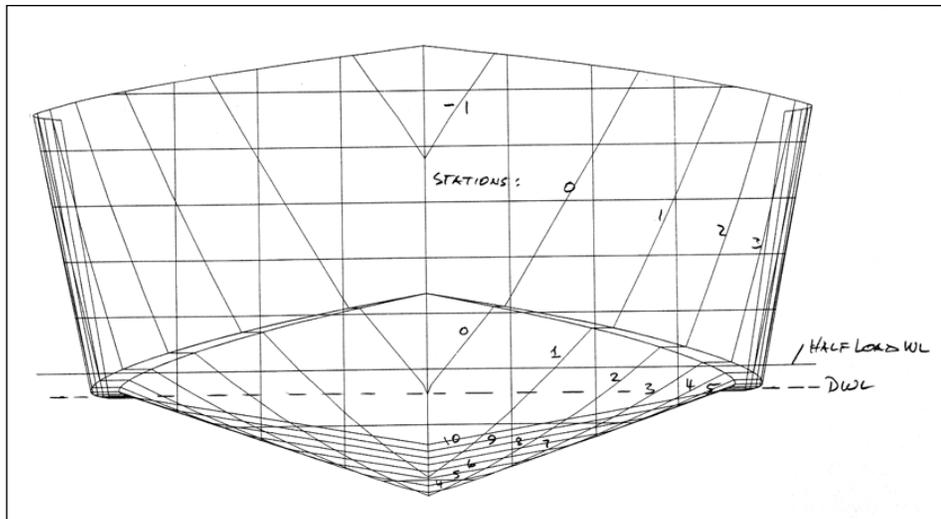
ALASKA BOUND were Nick Wahl and his wife, Eunice. There's a lot to like on Wahl's boat, but he really favors the enclosed top house, which will keep him warm and dry.

to do it now, because it could be his last chance.

"I was going to name it My Last Boat," Wahl jokes.

Wahl, who was born and raised in

Dillingham, Alaska, has fished Bristol Bay for over 50 years. He got his first boat in 1955 at the age of 18, when he put an engine in a Bristol Bay sailing gillnetter. To keep himself busy in those



SO IMPRESSED was Nick Wahl with these lines for a 40-footer that they were the basis for his boat's design. The chine's 6-inch width is carried into the bow area.

early years, he obtained a commercial pilot's license in 1964, and in the winters flew herring spotter planes and air taxis for 25 years.

In terms of propulsion, Wahl has come a long way since he converted that sailing boat. The Chris K has twin 450-hp C Series Cummins Marine diesels and Hamilton 292 water jets. Pitsch normally uses 315-hp B Series Cummins engines and Hamilton 274 jets in his Bristol Bay gillnetters, but because of the Chris K's large house, and the amount of fish that can be packed into its nine holds, Pitsch moved up to the bigger power package to push the Chris K to the 40 knots she hit on her sea trials.

"That's 46 miles per hour — not too bad," says Pitsch.

To help the boat get up on a plane quickly and stay there, All American Marine altered the way it builds its hull by designing a reverse chine into the Chris K.

Wahl says even with its advantages for planing, speed, increased stability and a softer ride, a reverse chine isn't common on bay boats.

When the boat is moving forward, the chine's shape forces water down, creating a force that helps lift the boat up and out of the water and on-step. Pitsch estimates that even with choppy weather, the boat should cruise at 25 knots.

"The angle [of the chine] creates a

quicker lift, and hopefully, more speed," Wahl explains. "But if the angle goes down too much, it creates drag and actually slows you down."

"It's the first one we've ever done," says Pitsch. He says building a hull with a reverse chine is more time-consuming than constructing a standard hard chine; but considering everything, "we just decided, 'let's go ahead and do that.'"

Weight savings

The hull is constructed of 1/4-inch aluminum bottom plate and 3/16-inch aluminum side plating with four 0.160-inch-thick transverse bulkheads.

"The bulkheads are where we started our weight-saving thing a long time ago. We used to use 1/4 inch on the bulkheads; now we use 0.160 inch, and we have it corrugated for stiffness, so we save about 40 percent in weight there," says Pitsch.

Bristol Bay is a mostly shallow body of water, with depths of 20 to 30 feet. Some gillnetters fish in depths under 2 feet, and in these shallow spots, a boat with water jets has a competitive edge over a conventional gillnetter, which draws more water because she's dragging a rudder, prop and keel. Wahl says he chose water jets for better maneuverability when fishing in 18-inch depths. The jets also allow a boat to slide over nets, whereas a boat with a rudder and

prop would catch the net.

"You are going to have a lot more maneuverability in the shallow drafts. You can turn the boat 360 degrees on its axis without going forward or backwards. You can't do that with props," says Pitsch.

The trick to building a boat with jets, says Pitsch, is in the longitudinal center of gravity. Boats with jets need to be light, and the weight distribution has to be precise. With outdrives, the fuel can be all the way to the stern, but with jets, the fuel and the weight need to be in the bow to get the center of gravity correct. If the weight is in the stern, "you can throw the whole gob of horsepower in it, and it still won't go," says Pitsch.

The gillnetter's 14-foot flush deck holds a hydraulically driven Kinematic sliding net reel and the power roller, which is covered in rubber for extra grip. The anchor winch, herring shaker, level wind, and wash-down pump are also hydraulically driven. (The shaker stays on for herring. The level wind goes on for salmon fishing.)

The sliding reel is on tracks, so it can be moved forward and back along the deck and spun around, allowing the net to be set off the stern and picked up off the bow. Since it's on tracks, the net reel can also be moved away from the hold when Wahl is delivering fish. He says this reel arrangement has always worked better for him than an articulated reel, which pivots back and forth.

"That's pretty much a big deal of this boat — it is a bowpicker, but it's designed to set the gear fast. You just move the drum forward, spin it, and you can set it off the stern," says Pitsch.

There are nine fish holds with 42" x 42" openings. With depths of 5 feet, the holds are the deepest Pitsch has built in a gillnetter. They hold 3,000 pounds each. Wahl designed them around the size of his brailer bags, because he felt one standard size would be easier to manage.

Although refrigeration is now more common in Bristol Bay boats, Wahl felt he would be on the grounds for such a short time he wouldn't need refrigeration. Sometimes he's only out for 8 to 12 hours.

"For the way I operate, it wasn't worth the extra expense to me," he says.

Wahl spent a large portion of his design time experimenting with different patterns for the 12' x 12' enclosed cabin and step-up wheelhouse. The finished product, which maximizes space in the dining and sleeping areas, includes two starboard bunks on the main level, complete head facilities, port side U-shaped galley table with seating for five, sink and propane stove, marine oil heater, and a bunk up top. The interior is finished in teak plywood and teak trim.

At 66 years old, Wahl has spent decades in Bristol Bay's frigid weather. So

INSIDE THE CHRIS K

- **Owner:** Nick Wahl, Dillingham, Alaska
- **Builder:** All American Marine, Ferndale, Wash.
- **Designers:** Nick Wahl and All American Marine
- **Measurements:** 32' x 14'
- **Bottom plating:** 1/4 inch
- **Side plating:** 3/16 inch
- **House plating:** 0.160 inch
- **Deck plating:** 0.160 inch
- **Frames:** 1/4 inch bent 90 degrees
- **Longitudinal stringers:** Two dividers (0.160 inches and corrugated) running from engine room bulkhead forward.
- **Deck beams:** 2 x 2 square tubing
- **Bulkheads:** Four 0.160-inches, corrugated for stiffness
- **Engine stringers:** 3/8" x 6'
- **Fuel capacity:** 400 gallons
- **Water capacity:** 75 gallons

he decided it was finally time to come in out of the weather. "I have spent hours and hours on the bridge, freezing and wet. The enclosed top house was the one thing I really wanted," he laughs.

The kick-out front window lets Wahl talk to the crew without leaving the captain's chair, and the 360-degree visibility lets him watch for other boats, when



TAKING UP most of the Chris K's deck space is net hauling equipment: a power roller, herring shaker and sliding net reel.

he's fishing and at anchor.

Wheelhouse electronics include a radar, GPS, plotter, VHF, radios, depth finder and a CD player.

Sitting at the dock before getting his boat to the barge that would take it to Alaska, Wahl couldn't help reflecting on the building of and transition of Bristol Bay boats.

"Long ago, they were more like cookie-cutter boats, and I remember when 100 to 130 boats would come up there on the barge — double layers of them. It was amazing. But now, they are more custom. Everyone has his own idea of what he wants to incorporate onto his boat, and how he wants it rigged out.

"There are some real dogs up there, but there are some real nice ones, too. If we all had the same taste, all the boats would be the same. What is ugly is all in the eye of the beholder." **NF**

For contact information on companies mentioned in this article, see page 57.

FISHING THE BAY

Bristol Bay is the largest commercial sockeye fishery in the world and accounts for over 30 percent of Alaska's salmon production, while Alaska accounts for 95 percent of all Pacific salmon landings in the United States, in large part because of the Bristol Bay harvest. The Chris K's owner, Nick Wahl, has been a part of this fishery over the past 50 years, and he's also a part of its future.

"Bristol Bay used to be a friendly fishery, but now it's a cutthroat business, and that took the

fun out of it. I'd say I was competitive when I was younger, but now people are vicious — they try to put you out of commission, and that took the fun out of it. There is no regard for other people," says Wahl.

"I think that will change when there is no money to be made. But when there are big bucks to be made, it will stay the same way it is now."

Wahl's wife, Eunice, and daughters have shared some of the ups-and-downs of the Bristol Bay fishery with him. Eunice joined him for 16 seasons in Bristol Bay after they were married in 1964. ("It took three men to replace her," he says with pride.) His two daughters worked as deckhands. One daughter still flies in from New Hampshire each summer to crew with him.

Although somewhat concerned with the downturn in the Bristol Bay fishery, Wahl doesn't see a reason to panic.

"There were poor runs before, in the 1960s and 1970s. The last 25 years have been exceptionally good, but it has crashed before. Most guys in the fishery don't know what a poor season is. You get a couple bad seasons and they think it's a disaster.

"You have to realize there are going to be bad years, and you just plan for it," he says. — J.K.