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Open water on Chena River is trouble for Iron Dog finish

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FAIRBANKS — Iron Dog racers might need boats to finish the world’s longest, toughest snowmachine race in Fairbanks on Saturday.

Iron Dog officials are hoping for colder temperatures during the next few days to freeze a 30-foot wide channel of open water that has emerged on the Chena River upstream and downstream of the finish line at Pike’s Landing.

The 1,971-mile snowmachine race is scheduled to finish Saturday at about noon.

“We’re watching the ice out here and crossing our fingers it’s going to get colder,” Iron Dog executive race director Laura Bedard said. “It’s our goal to do the finish at Pike’s unless something prevents us from doing that.”

Race officials arrived in Fairbanks Sunday night to find the finish line under water and immediately began formulating contingency plans for a different finish area. Bedard consulted with local snowmachine guru Howie Thies, who organizes the Arctic Man Ski and Sno-Go Classic and helps Iron Dog officials coordinate the race finish in Fairbanks.

After surveying the situation, Thies said the water at Pike's Landing is overflow, not open water, and that is there is a good chance it will freeze over prior to Saturday's finish with temperatures forecast down to 20 degrees below zero at night.

"There's plenty of ice; it's just that there's overflow on top of it," Thies said.

But hydrologist Ed Plumb at the National Weather Service in Fairbanks saw things differently after investigating the scene at Pike's on Tuesday.

"I would call that open water, not overflow," Plumb said. "It's right where the (river) channel is.

"The ice might have sunk and be submerged somewhere under there but you can see a big drop off between the shore-fast ice and the water," he said. "It'd freeze pretty quick if it gets cold but I don't know if I'd put a lot of people out there for the Iron Dog."

Judging from what happened to a man attempting to flee on a snowmachine following an alleged robbery at Pike's on Saturday night, it's very deep overflow if it's not open water.

The man, David W. Hodges, 32, sank his snowmachine in the river in front of Pike's, and only the front of the skis of the machine were showing when Alaska State Troopers arrived. Another snowmachiner had apparently brought Hodges to shore, where troopers found him soaking wet.

Even if the water freezes and racers are able to reach the finish line at Pike's, Bedard said, finish activities will be staged in the parking lot, not on the river, to keep people off the ice.

Race officials likely will make a decision on the finish sometime on Friday when racers reach Tanana, where they will be held for a

Saturday re-start for the final 200 miles to ensure a daylight finish in Fairbanks.

One option is to end the race about at the The Pump House restaurant, about a half-mile downstream of Pike's, but Thies said there was some overflow or open water at that location, too. Another option would be to finish the race on the Tanana River at the Chena Pump wayside and boat launch on Chena Pump Road, just before the point where racers turn up the Chena River for Pike's.

"We definitely have a contingency plan to take them off the river further down if we need to," Bedard said.

For the past three years, the race has officially ended just downstream of Pike's Landing, where the Riverboat Discovery is parked, but the finish ceremonies have been traditionally staged on the river in front of Pike's. The exception was last year when the

finish ceremony was extended to downtown Fairbanks for the first time.

Race officials ruled out a downtown finish last month because of unsafe river conditions near where Noyes Slough flows into the river just upstream of the University Avenue bridge.

On Feb. 2, Plumb measured the Chena River ice at Pike's at 24 inches, but the warm temperatures the past two weeks have obviously had an effect on the river, he said.

There is traditionally an open water hole upstream of Pike's that doesn't freeze unless it's extremely cold, and that hole simply could have eaten its way downriver during the warm weather last week, Plumb said.

"It wouldn't be first time there was patch of open water there by March 1," he said of the ice in front of Pike's. "I don't remember it being this open this early."

A cooler air mass is moving into the Tanana Valley that will bring more normal temperatures, Plumb said. Highs will be in the low teens or high single digits while lows will dip down to as cold as 20 below at night, he said.

The normal high is 12 above and the normal low is 14 below.

A little water at the finish line shouldn't bother racers after traversing almost 2,000 miles of Alaska wilderness, Thies said.

"They're going through a hell of a lot more water than this to get here," he said.

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