

Association of Village Council Presidents Press Release

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For Immediate Release

Communities Along the Kuskokwim River Prepare for Significant Potential Flooding

Bethel, Alaska - Regional Resources Coordination Committee (RRCC) Chair, Alvin Jimmie Sr., Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) VPSO Coordinator, lead a teleconference today on the break-up of the Kuskokwim River.

Representative from the following communities, tribes, and subregional clinics participated, including: Akiak, Aniak, Bethel, Kalskag, Kwethluck, Napaimute, Napaskiak, Tuluksak, Oscarville.

The RCC is made up of representatives from the following regional organizations: AVCP, the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC), City of Bethel, the Lower Kuskokwim, the Alaska National Guard, and Orutsararmiut Native Council. The RCC monitors and prepares for possible flooding conditions every spring as the river ice melts and begins flowing down the river. Every year, as the ice melts, uneven chunks can form and cause jams that build up pressure and flood into communities. This year was colder than recent years and resulted in more ice on the river. All communities on the call agreed that this year's conditions are unusual and different than the past several spring break-ups.

All participants on the teleconference reported significantly higher water conditions than usual. They reported unusual conditions such as a rise and fall of the water around the same time ice broke off above Napaimute (many miles up river from Bethel). VPSO Sgt. Daniel Max Olick Sr. of Kwethluk says, "This is the first time I've seen the water go up before the ice starts going down [the river]."

The State of Alaska Emergency Operations Center advised communities on the call: "The course of action for all communities is to implement the local

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evacuation plan and to move to those evacuation areas.” For emergency evacuations, communities are to call the Alaska State Troopers, who will initiate the search and rescue operations. YKHC must be notified for medical assessments or support for medically fragile individuals.

“Evacuation is a consideration, but it’s the last option we consider.” says a representative from the State of Alaska Emergency Operations Center. At 7:00 p.m. tonight, they will host another teleconference with the affected and potentially affect tribes and cities, to report back on the observations of today’s flyover the Kuskokwim River from Napaimute to the outlet of the river.

High schools will serve as primary evacuation sites. Some communities have multiple evacuation sites. In the case of Tuluksak, for example, their two evacuation sites will only hold about half of their population.

The next communities that anticipate break up and possibly flooding are Aniak, Upper Kalskag, and Lower Kalskag.

As a result of a construction project in Aniak, the culverts and ditches that took on overflow in former years have been filled in this year. If the lakes between Upper and Lower Kaskag continue to rise, soon they will block the road between Lower and Upper Kalskag. “Lakes from the back are filling up,” says Tribal Administrator, Bonnie Persson. “Years ago, it happened that it built up from the backside. You’re hit from the back and the front side.”

Tuluksak, Akiak, Akiachak, and Kwethluk expect water and ice to come from all four directions.

The Kuskokwim River has currently flooded the Native Village of Napaimute. Two Elders were rescued by helicopter from their homes last night (Thursday, April 31, 2020). Ben Leary of Napaimute reports no change to water levels in the last 24 hours. “We’re almost out of it.” he says. “We’re just waiting on that solid sheet of ice.... All the cabins below us are whipped out.” The Native Village of Napaimute sits between mountains, unlike most Kuskokwim communities where water can level-out over the flat tundra.

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“We are anticipating more water coming down,” says Jimmie Sr. “I know it’s not something good to hear, but being prepared is better than being sorry.”

Vinny Corazza, Bethel City Manager, reports that the City of Bethel’s Emergency Operations Center has been open since April 1, 2020, in response to a COVID-19. The Center is now prepared to focus on the results of break-up and possibly flooding. He says the first option is to shelter in place. The second option is to shelter on higher ground. He recommends shelter at hotels to maintain social distancing, as much as possible. “Worst-case scenario,” he says “is congregated sheltering.”

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For additional information, please contact AVCP Director of Communications, Azara Mohammadi, at 907-543-7317 or email at azaram@avcp.org.

AVCP is a regional nonprofit tribal consortium comprised of the 56 federally recognized tribes of the YK Delta. The geographic boundaries of AVCP extend from the Yukon River Village of Russian Mission downstream to the Bering Sea coast, north up through Kotlik and south along the coastline to Platinum and then extending up the Kuskokwim River to Stony River, including Lime Village on the Stony River tributary. The area encompasses approximately 6.5 million acres, or 55,000 square miles, in Western Alaska.