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PRESS RELEASE

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River Watch teams prepared to launch as river break-up begins

River Watch teams conduct river breakup observation and provide early warning to residents

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska – The State of Alaska Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (DHS&EM) is assisting communities in preparation for breakup along Alaska’s major river systems this spring. Breakup is a time of both excitement and anxiety. Residents anticipate the ability to travel along the rivers, but are also concerned with the threat that ice jam flooding poses to their communities.

Each spring the River Watch program renews a partnership between DHS&EM and the National Weather Service (NWS). The Alaska-Pacific River Forecast Center (APRFC) and DHS&EM conduct aerial observations of rivers prone to ice jam flooding. The team provides flood warnings and assists communities responding to flood emergencies. The River Watch partnership has existed for more than 30 years. The first River Watch team is planning to begin surveillance flights on the Upper Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers the first week of May.

The Alaska Pacific River Forecast Center has updated their spring flood outlook based on river ice thickness, snowpack, and climate outlooks. The Kuskokwim, Upper Yukon River, and rivers along Turnagain Arm, Gulf of Alaska, and northern Southeast Panhandle are considered above average; the Tanana, remainder of the Yukon River, and Copper Rivers are considered average, and the North Slope and Koyukuk Rivers are considered below average.

“We take the above average river flooding very seriously. We are communicating with communities in all areas to make them aware of the flood potential, encouraging communities to take steps to prepare for flooding, and readying our response partners so the state can act quickly if flooding occurs,” said Bryan Fisher, DHS&EM acting director. “As we have for many years, River Watch will be in place to provide up-to-date flood information to communities, and help respond if flooding occurs.”

This year, due to COVID-19 concerns, the River Watch team may or may not land in some communities. All COVID-19 safety protocols will be in effect where River Watch teams land, such as wearing masks, and social distancing. If a community asks for a River Watch team not to land, the team will provide the same observations and warning services via VHF radio as they fly over the community. Currently, River Watch is conducting a series of teleconferences with partners and river communities along the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers.

An Alaska Army National Guard hoist-capable UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter is traveling to Bethel today as part of the State’s effort to prepare for disaster response in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region during the spring flood season. They will continue their regular federal mission training while in Bethel, ready to

respond to the State upon request. A Black Hawk aircrew is equipped and prepared to respond expeditiously to a rapid event that may require evacuation.

This year's breakup forecast may be found at <http://www.weather.gov/aprfc/floodpotential>
Break up map at <https://www.weather.gov/aprfc/breakupMap>

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