

**COVID-19  
Unified Command**

State Emergency Operations Center

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**STATE OF ALASKA**



**Joint Information Center**

*Governor Mike Dunleavy  
Department of Health and Social Services  
Department of Public Safety  
Department of Military and Veterans Affairs*

**PRESS RELEASE**

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**River Watch Monitors River Break Up Conditions During COVID-19**

**JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska** — The Unified Command has established a River Watch Group in order to conduct the aerial monitoring of Alaska ice jam prone rivers during spring break-up. The River Watch Team observes the river break-up front to identify potential jams, and then alerts communities that could be impacted by ice jam flooding. In addition, River Watch teams provide direct emergency management support to riverside communities experiencing ice jam flooding.

Ice jam flooding occurs when large solid pans of ice form a dam blocking the flow of water and ice downriver. Ice jams can be several miles long and develop massive water and ice reservoirs that flow over the banks of the river. With enough pressure the jams release and cause significant damage to river side communities as over-the-banks water and ice rapidly flows through homes and infrastructure.

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 River Watch team is staffed with a DHS&EM emergency manager and a National Weather Service, Alaska-Pacific River Forecast Center hydrologist. In addition, a local pilot familiar with the river and nearby communities is part of the team.

River Watch teams plan to begin surveillance flights on the Kuskokwim River on April 29 and Upper Yukon River system on May 1.

Operations during COVID-19 will be adjusted to protect communities from River Watch teams. Unlike previous years, community members, media personnel, and River Watch trainees will not be flying with the teams this year.

In addition, River Watch Teams will be participating in community meetings and community media interviews remotely and from the community's airport to provide for social distancing. River Watch Teams do not intend to enter communities beyond the airstrip and will rely on radio and telephone communications to communicate river conditions.

"It's obviously more effective to communicate with people face to face, and to let them see the river conditions first hand," said Claud Denver, Unified Command Emergency Services Branch Director.

“During the COVID-19 crisis River Watch needs to adjust the practices we have used for decades, but at the same time we must ensure Alaskans receive these critical alerts and warnings. “

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