**Yukon River Inter-Tribal Watershed Council**

Talking points to accompany draft watershed/water quality plan ( drafted Feb 2013, revised Feb 2017)

**What is the “Yukon River Watershed Plan and Water Quality Standards”?** At the direction of its leadership, the Watershed Council has developed and adopted a **basinwide watershed plan** for the Yukon River. The focus of this plan is a set of specific **water quality standards** designed to protect the quality and flow of the water in the Yukon River. We now seek support from tribes and First Nations to help improve the plan and guide the Watershed Council’s next steps.

**Why did the Watershed Council develop this plan?** To improve and protect the quality of the Yukon River water over the long run, both to sustain the health of our communities and to have healthy, productive habitats for the fish, animals and plants of the watershed. Developing our own water quality plan is also a way to assert the sovereign rights of the Tribes and First Nations to participate in governing the resources of the Yukon River.

**What happens now that the plan has been reviewed and adopted?** The Watershed Council’s next bi-annual summit, to be held in Carcross, Yukon, in August 2017. Our goal is to have as many in the individual Tribes and First Nations adopt the watershed plan and water quality standards. A model resolution and model ordinance are included in the plan for convenience. The basinwide plan will also set in motion a process for identifying locally the activities in the Yukon River basin that degrade or threaten to degrade the water quality of the Yukon River in violation of the standards, as well as actions that can address those threats.

The Watershed Council leadership and staff will visit with the governments and communities of the Yukon First Nations and Tribes over the next six months to help indigenous communities understand the plan and to listen to concerns. We are just beginning that effort -- that is the purpose of this note and the draft plan that goes with it.

**Why now?** Developing a basinwide water quality plan is the next logical step in the Watershed Council’s mission. The Watershed Council and its member nations have been working for 20 years to increase our capacity to work together, to monitor water quality and develop a first-class science program with a collective body of water quality information about the Yukon River that no one else has, and to address contamination sources through backhaul and training programs. At the Watershed Council’s Summit in Ruby, Alaska, in August 2011, the YRITWC leadership decided it is time for the First Nations and Tribes of the Watershed Council to be more assertive in bringing all this capacity and knowledge and action together into a collective inter-tribal plan for the Yukon River. A watershed plan to match the vision of the Watershed Council founders of a river clean enough to drink from and to sustain the coming generations of the Yukon basin.

**How has the Watershed Council staff developed the water quality plan?** Our ultimate intent, at the direction of the Watershed Council leadership, is to have a plan that combines the best of the water quality information and modern scientific knowledge of the Watershed Council’s science staff and the Yukon governments’ environmental and natural resources staff *with* the traditional environmental knowledge of the governments and communities and people of the river. At this point the watershed plan begins with the vision and objectives of the Tribes and First Nations in forming the Watershed Council. The plan then proposes a set of water quality standards that describe in measurable terms the quality of the water necessary to match that vision of a Yukon River substantially unaltered from natural conditions in terms of quality and quantity and flow. The proposed water quality standards are derived from the information on water quality that the Watershed Council has and the most stringent water quality standards developed by other Tribes and States in the Pacific Northwest to protect human health and aquatic life.

**How does this effort relate to existing laws and rights and relationships?** The watershed plan has been designed to be consistent with -- and an expression of -- any water rights and other rights of the Yukon First Nations and Alaskan Tribes. This includes the right and expectation to have the flow of the Yukon River remain substantially unaltered as to quantity, quality and rate of flow through or adjacent to the First Nations lands, a right that is described in the Umbrella Final Agreement (although the UFA is *not* the source of the right) and consistent with the inherent rights of the Alaskan tribes expressed at this point in time in reserved water rights held by the U.S. government. The plan will also be designed to build on your existing relationships with the national, provincial and state governments, but also designed to improve substantially on those governance relationships over time.

**How does the plan get implemented?** Once the Watershed Council does its work and individual tribes and First Nations approve a high-quality basinwide watershed plan for the Yukon River, we expect to enter into government-to-government discussions with the other sovereign governments in the Yukon River basin (federal, province, and state) to implement the water quality standards and other elements of watershed plan, in shared governance approach to the river. At the approval of the Watershed Council’s Executive Committee, we sent these governments in the summer of 2012 alerting them to what we are working on and our expectations for when we have completed the watershed plan and approved the water quality standards.

As noted above, the basinwide watershed plan will be designed so that each Tribe and First Nation will be able to consider and adopt by Ordinance the water quality standards, and thus implement the plan within their own area of governance. But more important, the plan will also be designed with the assumption that the Tribes and First Nations will then work, individually and collectively, with the other sovereign entities in the basin to secure recognition and implementation of these standards as well as the appropriate participation of the Tribes and First Nations in the governance of the river to this end. We believe it is within the authorities of the relevant agencies of the other sovereign entities to enter into cooperative management agreements with the Tribes and First Nations to implement these standards, although we also recognize this may require some persuasion. The water quality plan will, over the long run, be as much about governance as about water quality -- about what it means to assert a more significant role for the Tribes and First Nations in the governance of the Yukon River to protect the water for all the people of the basin. This will be a project of many years, to protect in law the quality of the Yukon River and the role of the Tribes and First Nations in the governance of the river.