The weight of too much snow on relatively thin ice is causing overflow throughout the Kuskokwim River and its tributaries.

Left picture is in the Johnson River. Right picture is Napakiak Slough.

12.19.23 BSAR Kuskokwim River Aerial Survey—Report 2023-24 - 02*

“Too Much Too Soon”

Summary:

It has been one month since our last aerial survey. River conditions have slowly improved...very slowly.

Most open water areas are still there but have gotten smaller. Some have completely froze over with thin ice covered by fresh snow.

The main area of concern at this time is the Upper End of Kuskokwuak Slough.

THERE IS STILL LARGE UNMARKED OPEN WATER IN THIS AREA

Besides open water areas the travel concern now is overflow. We have not had much cold weather and new snow almost every day. This insulating snow is not allowing the ice to thicken. As the weight of it continues to increase it is pushing the thin ice down squeezing water out from the cracks – especially near the shoreline.

In some areas it is all over the River under the snow.

Ice measurements in the Bethel area taken on 12.20.23 are showing ice from 13” to 15”. However, the area between Oscarville and Napaskiak is still only 9” thick!
Highlights of the 12.19.23 BSAR Aerial Survey include:

- Poor visibility and fresh snow made it difficult to fully observe conditions
- No recent truck trails were observed anywhere due to deeper snow and overflow
- The main channel of the Kuskokwim is still very rough from the Johnson River up to just below Napakiak
- The open water in front of Kwethluk has frozen over but is thin and covered with snow
- The Upper End of Kuskokuak Slough and the main channel toward both Akiak and Akiachak is still a major DANGER ZONE! There are at least 3 large open holes in this area. Travel to Akiak is through Akiachak.
- Akiak to Tuluksak still has several large open water areas – there is no established trail on the River between Akiak and Tuluksak.
- All travel to Tuluksak is through the overland trail to Akiachak
- Tuluksak to Kalskag also has several large open water areas – they are slowly getting smaller

Pictures From Our Flight:
Snowmachiner safely passing by a MARKED open hole at the upper entrance to the Tuluksak - Akiachak overland trail (yellow arrow). Tuluksak Search & Rescue built a willow fence to direct traffic away from the open water (red line).

Closing:

Travel by snowmachine on established trails is pretty good right now. Travel off trails on the River is not recommended due to snow covered thin ice and overflow.

Truck travel is also not recommended for the same reasons. In addition there are areas of deep drifted snow where smaller vehicles will get stuck.

It looks like it will be a while yet before the ice is thick enough for an ice road to be established and plowed.

Thank you to all the good People along the River that have been out there marking open water and trails to keep travelers safe.

Also a big thank you to Fox Air and pilot Brad Peterson for the good flight.

Happy Holidays & Safe Travels from Bethel Search Rescue!

*Please Note this report is for informational purposes only. It is not an advisory that it is safe to travel

This aerial survey was sponsored by the NVN Ice Road crew and the State of Alaska Safe Ice Roads for Alaska Program.