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For Immediate Release

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments, Reach Agreement

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments (CATG or Council) today announced a tentative agreement on a proposal whereby the Council would perform some of the Service's activities on the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge during 2004-2005.

Under the proposed agreement, the Council would perform activities including: 1) locating and marking public easements across private lands within the Refuge boundary; 2) assisting with environmental education and outreach in local villages; 3) monitoring wildlife harvest; 4) surveying moose populations (in cooperation with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game); and 5) maintaining Federal property in and around Fort Yukon. Public use (including sport and subsistence hunting, fishing and trapping) will not be affected by this tentative agreement. Management authority will remain with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as required by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act.

The proposed agreement is the product of almost two years of negotiations. The proposal is now available for a 45-day public review prior to its planned signing. Public comments will be accepted through March 29. A copy can be viewed at <http://alaska.fws.gov/current.htm>. After reviewing the public's comments, the Service and the Council will have the option of either signing the agreement or renewing negotiations. Once a final agreement is signed in Alaska, it will be subject to a 90-day review by the U.S. Congress before going into effect.

The CATG is a consortium representing the Tribal Governments of Arctic, Beaver, Birch Creek, Canyon, Chalkyitsik, Circle, Fort Yukon, Rampart, Stevens, and Venetie. Members of these tribes live near or within the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, the third largest of the more than 540 conservation units in the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Refuge was established in 1980, and includes more than 8.5 million acres of wetland and boreal forest habitat along 300 miles of the Yukon River, north of Fairbanks, Alaska. It is internationally noted for its abundance of migratory birds.

Under provisions of the Indian Self-determination and Education Assistance Act, qualifying Indian Tribes and consortia of tribes may request to perform activities administered by the Department of the Interior which are of geographic, historic or cultural significance to the participating tribe making the request.

Ted Heuer, Refuge Manager of the Yukon Flats NWR since 1991, said, "The Service views this annual funding agreement as a mechanism to engage local residents in refuge management activities, increase the efficiency of refuge programs, and foster a closer relationship between refuge staff and local residents, including tribal members. The Service has worked with the Native people of the Yukon Flats for many years, and has great respect for their knowledge of the area and for their desire to protect the fish and wildlife resources of the area for future generations, a goal which reflects the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System."

Anna Huntington-Kriska, the Council's Executive Director said, "We are honored to begin this unique step in our government-to-government relationship with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This historic agreement is one of the first of its kind, and we look forward to an on-going relationship that will continue for years and will ultimately improve the management and operation of the Yukon Flats for future generations."

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 542 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices, and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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