



International Joint Commission (/en)
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International Joint Commission Activated in Elk-Kootenai/y Watershed

March 12, 2024

Washington, D.C. / Ottawa, Ontario — The International Joint Commission is pleased to receive a request from the governments of Canada and the United States, in partnership with the Ktunaxa Nation, to carry out certain actions outlined in the [reference letters and attachments \(https://ijc.org/en/reference-elk-kootenai-y-watershed\)](https://ijc.org/en/reference-elk-kootenai-y-watershed) addressing the impacts of transboundary water pollution in the Elk-Kootenai/y Watershed. The watershed is located in the province of British Columbia, and in the states of Montana and Idaho.

These actions include assisting in the establishment of a collaborative governance body that will, among other things, develop and report on an action plan to reduce and mitigate the impacts of water pollution in the Kootenai/y watershed in order to protect the people and species that depend on this vital river system. Further actions include: convening an IJC study board comprised of experts and knowledge holders to conduct and synthesize transparent and coordinated transboundary knowledge sharing on contaminants of concern; areas and water and ecological resources affected; and trends. The study board will seek opportunities for public engagement.

Established under the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty between Canada and the United States, the Commission employs joint science-based fact-finding as a foundation for building consensus and determining appropriate action.

The reference to address the impacts of transboundary water pollution in the Elk-Kootenai/y Watershed will form the basis of the Commission's efforts. This reference from governments is pursuant to Article IX of the Boundary Waters Treaty.

United States Commission Chair Gerald Acker indicated "the Commission welcomes the opportunity to assist governments to help find ways to reduce and mitigate the impacts of water pollution in the Kootenai Basin and to collaborate with all interested parties in doing so. Our ability to provide objective, expert analysis and recommendations is proven and we expect nothing less in this case."

The Commission's Canadian Chair Merrell-Ann Phare noted that "water quality concerns in this watershed have been present for decades and we are pleased that the IJC has been tasked to work on this matter further to a consensus reached between Canada, the United States, and the Ktunaxa Nation. Governance innovation with Indigenous Peoples will be a key component to our success."

The Commission will facilitate the governance body, set up a study board and will maintain open dialogue with federal and Ktunaxa governments, the province of British Columbia and the states of Idaho and Montana, along with the public throughout the related upcoming activities over the next two years. We will hold initial meetings in the basin in the coming months to allow interested parties to provide their thoughts and perspectives.

We encourage interested parties to follow us on social media and to visit our website, at [IJC.org \(https://ijc.org/en\)](https://ijc.org/en), to gather the latest information and to locate resources related to this Reference. Questions and comments can be submitted to Elk-Kootenai/y_Study@ijc.org. (mailto:Kootenai-y_Study@ijc.org)

Quick Facts

- The Elk River rises in the Canadian Rockies and flows into the United States at Lake Koocanusa, an impoundment of the Kootenay/Kootenai River. It then flows through the states of Montana and Idaho, and Ktunaxa lands, in route back to the province of British Columbia.
- The Commission has been contacted by agencies, public and Indigenous communities indicating water quality issues have reached a critical stage as stated in a [May 2022 IJC letter \(https://www.ijc.org/sites/default/files/letter-prime-minister-trudeau-president-biden-selenium-contamination.pdf\)](https://www.ijc.org/sites/default/files/letter-prime-minister-trudeau-president-biden-selenium-contamination.pdf) to governments.

Contacts

United States: Ed Virden, IJC Public Affairs Officer, 202-372-7990, Edward.virden@ijc.org (<mailto:Edward.virden@ijc.org>)

Canada: Paul Allen, Manager of Policy and Communications, 613-222-1475, Paul.allen@ijc.org (<mailto:paul.allen@ijc.org>)

Subscribe to the Shared Waters newsletter

Covering activities in the Canada-United States transboundary region, including the Great Lakes, as they relate to the IJC's mission.

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Washington Office

International Joint Commission

U.S. Section

1717 H Street NW, Suite 835

Washington DC 20006

United States

Phone: 202-736-9000 (tel:202-736-9000)

Fax: 202-632-2006 (tel:202-632-2006)

[Contact \(/en/contact/washington_contact_form\)](/en/contact/washington_contact_form)

Ottawa Office

International Joint Commission

Canadian Section

234 Laurier Avenue West, 22nd Floor

Ottawa ON K1P 6K6

Canada

Phone: 613-995-2984 (tel:613-995-2984)

Fax: 613-993-5583 (tel:613-993-5583)

[Contact \(/en/contact/ottawa_contact_form\)](/en/contact/ottawa_contact_form)

Windsor Office

International Joint Commission

Great Lakes Regional Office

100 Ouellette Ave., 8th Floor

Windsor ON N9A 6T3

Canada

Phone: 519-257-6700 (tel:519-257-6700)

Fax: 519-257-6740 (tel:519-257-6740)

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United States Department of State

*Assistant Secretary of State
Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs
Washington, D.C. 20520-6258*

March 8, 2024

Ms. Susan Daniel
Executive Secretary, U.S. Section
International Joint Commission
1717 H Street NW Suite 835
Washington, DC 20006

Dear Ms. Daniel,

U.S. and Canadian and federal agencies, provincial, state, and Indigenous governments, and stakeholders have been actively engaging in many conversations and cooperative initiatives regarding the impacts of water pollution in the Elk-Kootenai/y watershed, geographically known as the Kootenai/y watershed.

The Governments of the United States and Canada are committed to work cooperatively to ensure that our respective transboundary interests are protected. Toward this end, we draw your attention to the attached “Proposal to Address Transboundary Water Pollution in the Elk Kootenai/y Watershed.” We are pleased to note that this Proposal was developed in partnership with officials from the Ktunaxa Nation and has the support of the Nation’s leadership, as indicated in the attached statement. Canada is pleased to note that British Columbia has indicated its commitment to fully engage in this process.

In accordance with Article IX of the *Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909*, the governments of the United States and Canada hereby request the International Joint Commission (IJC) to take the actions described in items 1, 2 and 3 of the attached Proposal.

The Governance Body and Study Board are expected to respect the respective legal authorities and jurisdictions of each Government.

As described in the Proposal with regards to the Governance Body, the purpose of the targeted engagement is for Governments to develop a Terms of Reference to establish a Governance Body by June 30, 2024, with the IJC providing continued assistance and advice for the two years following receipt of this request.

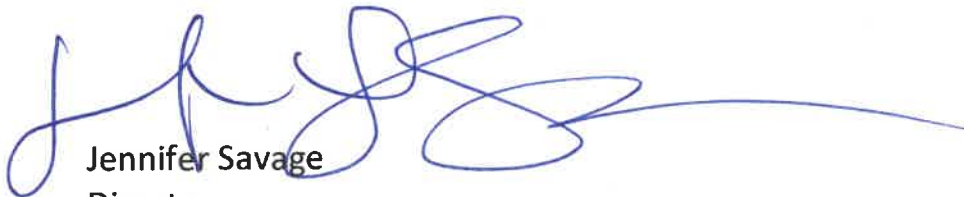
The Governments request that the IJC's plan of study also include an engagement plan as outlined in the attached Proposal, which ensures consultation with and participation by representatives from the relevant federal, provincial, state, First Nation, Tribal, industry and others in the watershed, as appropriate.

The Governments welcome the IJC's assistance and look forward to receiving the IJC's plan of study, engagement plan, timetable, and proposed budget as soon as possible.

Following receipt and review, the IJC can expect the U.S. and Canadian governments to submit a subsequent joint reference, in accordance with Article IX of the *Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909*, to execute the approved plan of study.

An identical letter is being sent by Global Affairs Canada to the Canadian Section of the Commission.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Savage
Director
Office of Canadian Affairs
U.S. Department of State

cc: IJC Commissioners

Attachments

1. Proposal to Address Transboundary Water Pollution in the Elk-Kootenai/y Watershed
2. Ktunaxa Nation Statement



March 8, 2024

Mr. Christopher Wilkie
Secretary, Canadian Section
International Joint Commission
234 Laurier Avenue West, 22nd Floor
Ottawa, Ontario
K1P 6K6

Dear Mr. Wilkie,

U.S. and Canadian federal agencies, provincial, state, and Indigenous governments, and stakeholders have been actively engaging in many conversations and cooperative initiatives regarding the impacts of water pollution in the Elk-Kootenay watershed, geographically known as the Kootenay watershed.

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An identical letter is being sent by the State Department to the U.S. Section of the Commission.

Sincerely,

Niall Cronin
Executive Director
U.S. Transboundary Affairs
Global Affairs Canada

Attachments:

- i. Proposal to Address Transboundary Water Pollution in the Elk-Kootenai/y Watershed;
- ii. Statement from Ktunaxa leadership

PROPOSAL TO ADDRESS TRANSBOUNDARY WATER POLLUTION IN THE ELK-KOOTENAI/Y WATERSHED

Mindful of the shared responsible stewardship for ʔa·kxam̓is ɓapi qapsin (All Living Things), which encompasses the interrelated nature of water, land, people, animals, and plants;

Understanding that the Elk-Kootenai/y watershed, referred to herein and geographically known as the Kootenai/y watershed, includes the Kootenai/y River flowing through Canada and the United States to its confluence with the Columbia River downstream in Canada, the Elk Subbasin, Kooanus Reservoir, and Kootenay Lake;

Understanding that Canada, the United States, and the Ktunaxa Nation¹ have reached consensus on the need for:

- (1) collaborative governance to ensure more timely action to reduce and mitigate the impacts of water pollution in the Kootenai/y watershed in order to protect the people and species that depend on this vital river system;
- (2) transparent and coordinated transboundary data and knowledge sharing, science, monitoring, and analysis to support a common understanding of pollution within the Kootenai/y watershed; and
- (3) transparent reporting on progress; and

Based on discussions between representatives of Canada, the United States, and Ktunaxa, and a review of and respect for the 2023 proposals from Canada, the United States, Ktunaxa, and British Columbia;

Canada and the United States commit to request the International Joint Commission (IJC or Commission) to (1) assist in the establishment of a Governance Body, and (2) convene experts and knowledge holders in a Study Board to report and make recommendations to the Governance Body to reduce and mitigate the impacts of water pollution in the Kootenai/y watershed, consistent with the Joint Statement of President Biden and Prime Minister Trudeau of March 24, 2023.

1. COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE AND ACTION PLANNING – GOVERNANCE BODY:

Canada and the United States commit to request the IJC to invite representatives of the federal and Ktunaxa Governments, the Province of British Columbia and the States of Idaho and Montana (hereafter referred to as “the Governments”), to a series of targeted engagements convened and facilitated by the IJC to assist the Governments as the Governments develop the Terms of Reference for a Governance Body. Canada and the United States commit to ask the IJC to (1) convene the Governments and facilitate

¹ ʔakisq̓nuk, ʔaq̓am, Yaq̓an Nuʔkiy, Yaq̓it ʔa·knuq̓iʔit, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho.

conversations, (2) assist to develop a draft Terms of Reference, and (3) provide the Commission's insights and expertise on the Terms of Reference, the structure of a Governance Body, and the possible role of the IJC with regard to the Governance Body.

Canada and the United States commit to ask the IJC to convene these targeted engagements, with the IJC serving as secretariat, as soon as possible. The purpose of the targeted engagement is for the Governments to develop a Terms of Reference to establish a Governance Body by June 30, 2024, with the IJC providing continued assistance and advice for the two years following receipt of the request. Within that time, the Governance Body is expected to consider the possible ongoing role of the IJC with respect to the Governance Body.

The Governance Body would: (1) review reports and recommendations from the Study Board; (2) identify and recommend actions and resources needed to fill priority data, monitoring, research, and reporting needs; (3) identify complementary and non-duplicative opportunities, supported by science and Indigenous knowledge, to reduce and mitigate the impacts of water pollution and protect the people and species in the Kootenai/y watershed; (4) develop an action plan to reduce and mitigate the impacts of water pollution in the Kootenai/y watershed in order to protect the people and species that depend on this vital river system; and (5) report on progress towards implementing these objectives. Canada and the United States expect the Governance Body to respect the respective legal responsibilities and jurisdictions of each Government.

2. IJC STUDY BOARD

Canada and the United States commit to request the IJC to convene experts and knowledge holders in an IJC Study Board to conduct transparent and coordinated transboundary data and knowledge sharing; share, synthesize, and analyze data and information to support a common understanding of pollution within the Kootenai/y watershed and the impacts of that pollution on people and species; and report and recommend in a transparent and publicly available format on the matters described below:

- a. The best available observational data, scientific research, and Indigenous knowledge on influences on, sources of, status of, and trends in pollution in water and associated effects on ecosystem health, which could include but is not limited to fish and aquatic life, wildlife, human health, and cultural uses in the Kootenai/y watershed;
- b. Data and research gaps, assumptions and uncertainties including any factors affecting data accessibility and comparability, such as data types and collection and reporting methods relevant to improving understanding, measurement, and monitoring of the matters reviewed by the Study Board;
- c. Recommendations for strengthening, coordinating and prioritizing efforts on data sharing and transparency, science, monitoring and research, and incorporation of Indigenous knowledge, and other next steps and recommended actions on the matters reviewed by the Study Board;
- d. A synthesis of the available data and scientific information and a resulting understanding of the water quality issues in the Kootenai/y watershed including contaminants of concern, areas, and water and ecological resources affected; and

- e. Methods and procedures for ongoing monitoring and data analyses to further define the extent of pollution and identify trends in concentrations of contaminants in the watershed.

Within six months from receipt of the request, the Commission is expected to establish the Study Board. The Study Board will be requested to submit an interim report within one year or earlier and a final report and recommendations, including recommendations of areas for further study, within two years of the Study Board's establishment. The Governance Body is expected to review the Study Board's reports and recommendations to support the Governance Body's responses to improve water quality and ecosystem health in the Kootenai/y watershed.

3. REPORTING AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The Governance Body is expected to be responsible for providing regular reporting on progress towards implementing its objectives. All agendas, meeting minutes, and reports of the Governance Body are expected to be publicly available, except that matters involving cultural resources or Indigenous knowledge may be kept confidential at the request of the Ktunaxa Nation governments and protected from disclosure to the extent allowable by law. The Study Board is expected to seek opportunities for public engagement, provide regular update reports, and make its reports available in a transparent, publicly available format.

It is understood that Governments will continue their work to consider further actions that can be taken to reduce and mitigate the impacts of water pollution in the Kootenai/y watershed while the Governance Body is being formed and the Study Board is conducting its work.

This proposal does not give rise to or otherwise affect any rights or obligations under international or domestic law.



Yaqit Tsaknuqti'it



January 2024

On behalf of the Governments of Tsakiscnuq, Tsaq'am, Yaqa Nu?kiy, Yaqit Tsaknuqti'it, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (Ksanka Band), and Tsaqanqmi (Kootenai Tribe of Idaho ("Ktunaxa Nation")), we write to confirm that the Ktunaxa Nation was involved in developing the Proposal to address transboundary water pollution in the Elk-Kootenai/y Watershed, in partnership with Canada and the United States. Our governments concur with the Proposal.

Michael Dolson

Michael Dolson, Chairman
Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

Joe Pierre

Joe Pierre (Jan 26, 2024 20:35 MST)

Joe Pierre
Nasu?kin, Tsaq'am

Jennifer Porter

Jennifer Porter, Chairwoman
Kootenai Tribe of Idaho

M. Jason Louie

M. Jason Louie (Jan 27, 2024 14:43 MST)

Jason Louie
Nasu?kin, Yaqa Nu?kiy

Donald Sam

Donald Sam (Jan 29, 2024 05:47 MST)

Don Sam
Nasu?kin, Tsakiscnuq

Heidi Gravelle

Heidi Gravelle (Jan 24, 2024 14:16 MST)

Heidi Gravelle
Nasu?kin, Yaqit Tsaknuqti'it

PROPOSAL TO ADDRESS TRANSBOUNDARY WATER POLLUTION IN THE ELK-KOOTENAI/Y WATERSHED

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It is understood that Governments will continue their work to consider further actions that can be taken to reduce and mitigate the impacts of water pollution in the Kootenai/y watershed while the Governance Body is being formed and the Study Board is conducting its work.

This proposal does not give rise to or otherwise affect any rights or obligations under international or domestic law.