

PRESS RELEASE

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Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Population Listed As Endangered

Conservation Groups Applaud NMFS Decision

ANCHORAGE (October 17, 2008) – Today the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) announced its long-awaited decision to list the Cook Inlet beluga whale population as "endangered" under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The Cook Inlet beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*) is a genetically distinct and geographically isolated population whose numbers have plummeted by over 50% in the past decade. The Cook Inlet beluga population's status is so perilous that in 2006 the scientific experts at the World Conservation Union (IUCN) placed the Cook Inlet beluga on its Red List for critically threatened species. The expert agency charged by Congress with protecting marine mammals – the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission - repeatedly requested that NMFS list the species under the ESA.

“The science was clear – and it has been for a very long time,” said marine mammal scientist Craig Matkin of the North Gulf Oceanic Society. “The population is critically endangered. The protections of the ESA provide the safety net so that the population can escape extinction and recover.”

Conservation groups initially filed a petition to list the population as endangered under the ESA in March 1999. Opposition from the State of Alaska, local cities and boroughs, and industry groups led NMFS to reject the petition. Instead, it listed the population as "depleted" under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. At that time, NMFS said that the imposition of severe restrictions on Alaska Native hunting imposed under that Act would lead to the population's recovery. While almost no Native hunting has occurred since then, recovery of the population has not occurred. Recent surveys show the Cook Inlet beluga whale's population now hovers around 375 animals, down from NMFS's estimated population of approximately 1,300 whales in the early 1990s.

Because the population had not recovered as NMFS predicted, in April 2006 conservation groups filed a new ESA listing petition. Once again, the petition was opposed by local cities and boroughs, and industry groups, and the State of Alaska. NMFS had until April 2008 to decide whether or not to list. It extended that deadline for 6 months (until October 20, 2008), however, at the request of the State of Alaska. The Palin Administration claimed that 2007 survey data demonstrated an upward increase in the population trend and therefore claimed that listing was unwarranted. NMFS's recent survey results have demonstrated, however, that there is no upward population trend.

“Hopefully the listing decision is not too late for the Cook Inlet beluga whale population's recovery,” said John Schoen, Senior Scientist of Audubon-Alaska. “It is unfortunate that the population was not listed in 2000, when the scientific evidence was overwhelming that it should be listed under the ESA.”

Cook Inlet is the most populated and fastest growing watershed in Alaska, and from oil and gas dumping, sewage discharges, contaminated runoff and regular shipping and pipeline spills, rising pollution levels threaten the Beluga whale and its habitat. Furthermore, several massive infrastructure projects – including the proposed Knik Arm Bridge, the Port of Anchorage Expansion, the Chuitna coal strip mine, and the Port MacKenzie expansion - will directly impact some of the whale's most important habitat. Listing the Cook Inlet beluga whale will ensure that developers and scientists work together to avoid further population declines.

“This ends the debate about whether the beluga should be protected under the Endangered Species Act, and starts the critically important process of actually working to recover the species and protect its habitat,” said Brendan Cummings, oceans program director for the Center for Biological Diversity. “Hopefully the State of Alaska will now work towards protecting the beluga rather than, as with the polar bear, denying the science and suing to overturn the listing.”

“Contrary to the rhetoric from opponents to listing in industry and government, evidence from across the nation shows an ESA designation will not curtail responsible development. Instead, a listing decision will simply ensure that federal agency actions do not jeopardize the whales or their habitat” said Karla Dutton, Defenders of Wildlife.

Cook Inlet is a unique setting that supports the southernmost of Alaska's five beluga populations. The Cook Inlet offers a true estuary environment which is very different from the beluga habitats to the north. According to the NMFS, no similar habitats exist in Alaska or anywhere else in the United States.

Those who petitioned to list the whale population under the ESA are: Cook Inletkeeper, Alaska Center for the Environment, National Audubon Society - Alaska State Office, North Gulf Oceanic Society, Alaska Community Action on Toxics, Natural Resource Defense Council (NRDC), Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, Kachemak Bay Conservation Society, Friends of the Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge, and Sylvia Brunner, PhD. Petitioners are represented by the nonprofit law firm Trustees for Alaska.

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