

PRESS RELEASE

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Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Population Flat Lines

President Bush, Governor Palin urged to respect scientific integrity & rule of law

ANCHORAGE (SEPT. 25, 2008) – Today the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) released survey results (attached) showing that the Cook Inlet beluga whale population has failed to grow as some industry and government interests had speculated. In response, marine mammal experts and conservation groups have renewed their calls for the Bush Administration to immediately list the Cook Inlet beluga whale as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA).

“The science is clear – and it has been for a very long time,” said marine mammal scientist Craig Matkin of the North Gulf Oceanic Society. “The population should be listed under the ESA immediately; not another week should pass. Only the science and protections offered by the ESA can provide the safety net for this population so that it can escape the threat of extinction.”

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. NMFS scientists estimated the Cook Inlet beluga population numbered approximately 1,300 whales as recently as the early 1990s. NMFS's most recent surveys show the whale's population now hovers around 375 animals.

After conservation groups petitioned to list the population under the ESA, NMFS had one year to determine whether or not to list. NMFS extended that deadline for 6 months (until October 20, 2008), however, at the request of the Palin Administration. 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 demonstrate that there is no upward population trend.

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 - also has repeatedly requested that NMFS list the species under the ESA, and earlier objected to NMFS's 6 month delay.

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“The Palin Administration's effort to deny the need for an ESA listing is part of a larger trend in Alaska government to overrule science that contradicts political ideology,” said John Schoen, Senior Scientist of Audubon-Alaska. “We’ve seen the same thing from the Palin Administration with the Polar Bear.”

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 now will ensure that developers and scientists work together to avoid further population declines.

“Contrary to the rhetoric from industry and government listing opponents, 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.

Similar to its position on the polar bear, Governor Palin’s Alaska Department of Fish & Game has relied on dubious arguments to oppose an ESA listing for the Cook Inlet beluga whale.

“Our organization looks at a lot of endangered species cases across the nation,” said Brendan Cummings of the Center for Biological Diversity. “The Cook Inlet beluga whale stands out because of the small size of the population, the threats to its survival, and the clear science that warrants a listing.”

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 have 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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NOAA

**NATIONAL OCEANIC AND
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE



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NOAA: Cook Inlet Beluga Population Holds Steady from 2007

The Cook Inlet beluga whale population has held steady from last year's count of 375 animals, based on NOAA's Fisheries Service latest annual survey.

NOAA's Fisheries Service scientists conducted aerial surveys in early June during fish migrations, when belugas concentrate near river mouths, including the Susitna and Little Susitna rivers, Knik Arm, and Chickaloon Bay.

NOAA's Fisheries Service scientists flew over upper Cook Inlet on seven days between June 3 and 12, manually counting the belugas while taking photographs and video of the whales.

Scientists later carefully examined the images to provide a more complete estimate of the total number of beluga whales in the inlet.

When scientists reanalyzed the 2008 survey observations, the population estimate remained the same as last year—375.

In 2007, NOAA's Fisheries Service accepted a petition to list the Cook Inlet beluga population as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. A final determination following completion of the population status review is due in October.

NOAA's Fisheries Service declared the Cook Inlet beluga population depleted in 2000 under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The population, however, has not recovered as hoped. Alaska native groups have been allowed to hunt the whales under co-management agreements with NOAA's Fisheries Service, with restrictions on how many whales could be taken in a given year. Between 1999 and 2007, hunters took five beluga whales for subsistence in Cook Inlet, down from 308 between 1995 and 1998. There was no subsistence hunt for beluga whales in 2008.

Cook Inlet belugas are one of five beluga populations recognized within U.S. waters. The others are Bristol Bay, eastern Bering Sea, eastern Chukchi Sea and Beaufort Sea.

The Cook Inlet beluga population estimates since 1994 are:

1994: 653

1995: 491

1996: 594

1997: 440

1998: 347

1999: 367

2000: 435

2001: 386

2002: 313

2003: 357
2004: 366
2005: 278
2006: 302
2007: 375
2008: 375

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