

## Common Name: Cook Inlet Beluga Whale

Scientific Name: *Delphinapterus leucas*

Area of Concern: Alaska (Cook Inlet population)

Year First Listed as a “Species of Concern”: 1997

### Species Description:

The beluga whale *Delphinapterus leucas* is a small, white whale. Adult belugas may reach a length of 16 feet. Calves are born dark gray to brownish gray and become lighter with age. Beluga whales lack a dorsal fin and do not typically produce a visible "blow" on surfacing. Beluga whales typically give birth to a single calf every two to three years. Beluga whales may live more than 30 years.



Beluga whales are covered with a thick layer of blubber that accounts for as much as 40 percent of its body. This fat provides thermal protection and stores energy. Beluga whales have a well-developed sense of hearing and echolocation, and are reported to have acute vision both in and out of water. Beluga whales are extremely social animals that typically migrate, hunt, and interact together. Beluga whales are circumpolar in distribution. Five distinct stocks occur in Alaska

### Rationale for “Species of Concern” Listing:

#### Demographic and Diversity Concerns:

Of the five stocks of beluga whales in Alaskan water, the Cook Inlet stock is the most isolated; genetic samples suggest they have been isolated for several thousand years. The Cook Inlet beluga has been severely reduced in numbers over the last several decades. NMFS estimates this population had once numbered as many as 1300. The most current estimate is 278 whales. The Cook Inlet stock of beluga whales is designated as depleted under the MMPA and is a candidate species under the ESA

#### Factors for decline

Human-caused mortality, primarily subsistence harvest by Alaska Natives, has been the most significant source of mortality within this population during recent times. Subsistence harvest is the only factor that can be identified as influencing the decline of the population from 1994 to 1998, prompting the “depletion” designation. Cook Inlet is highly developed, and human activity is expected to increase in the future. Potential human-caused threats include shipping, oil/gas production and transport, indirect and direct adverse effects from commercial fishing, habitat destruction and alteration, and harassment due to increasing commerce and recreation in the Inlet.

Status Reviews/Research Completed or Underway: NMFS found in June 2000 that listing the stock as threatened or endangered is not warranted (65 FR 38778; June 22, 2000). Because this stock has not shown significant evidence of recovery, NMFS initiated a second Status Review in the spring of 2006. NMFS was subsequently petitioned to list this stock as threatened or endangered under the ESA. The results of the status review are expected in the winter of 2006.

Further information: <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/protectedresources/whales/beluga.htm>

*For further information on this Species of Concern, or on the Species of Concern Program in general, please contact Ms. Marta Nammack, NMFS, Office of Protected Resources, 1315 East West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910, (301) 713-1401, x180, Marta.Nammack@noaa.gov; or Brad Smith, NMFS, 222 West 7th Avenue, Box 43, Anchorage, AK, 99513, (907) 271-3023, Brad.Smith@noaa.gov.*