



# NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC AND  
ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE



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## **NOAA Lists Cook Inlet Beluga Whales as Endangered**

NOAA today announced that the Cook Inlet beluga whale population near Anchorage is in danger of extinction, and has been listed as an endangered species.

"In spite of protections already in place, Cook Inlet beluga whales are not recovering," said James Balsiger, NOAA acting assistant administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service.

Listing the Cook Inlet beluga whales means any federal agency that funds, authorizes, or carries out new projects or activities that may affect the whales in the area must first consult with NOAA's Fisheries Service to determine the potential effects on the whales. A federal action must not jeopardize the continued existence of a listed species.

In 2000, NOAA declared the Cook Inlet beluga population depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. In response to a petition submitted by the Trustees for Alaska on April 20, 2006, the agency proposed on April 20, 2007, that Cook Inlet beluga whales be listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The act requires a final determination by Oct. 20, 2008. This announcement is the result of NOAA's scientific review of the proposal to list Cook Inlet belugas.

The Cook Inlet beluga population declined nearly 50 percent between 1994 and 1998, based on annual scientific surveys. NOAA scientists estimated the Cook Inlet beluga population at 375 for both 2007 and 2008. Estimates have varied from a high of 653 belugas in 1994 to a low of 278 belugas in 2005.

Despite restrictions on Alaskan Native subsistence harvest of Cook Inlet belugas starting in 1999, the population is still not recovering. Between 1999 and 2006, Alaska Native hunters took a total of five Cook Inlet beluga whales for subsistence. No beluga whales were harvested in 2007 or 2008.

Cook Inlet belugas are one of five populations of belugas recognized within U.S. waters. The other beluga populations inhabit Bristol Bay, the eastern Bering Sea, the eastern Chukchi Sea, and the Beaufort Sea. Of the five stocks of beluga whales in Alaska, the Cook Inlet population is considered to be the most isolated, based on the degree of genetic differentiation and geographic distance between the Cook Inlet population and the four other beluga stocks.

The recovery of the Cook Inlet whales is potentially hindered by strandings; continued development within and along upper Cook Inlet and the cumulative effects on important beluga habitat; oil and gas exploration, development, and production; industrial activities that discharge or accidentally spill pollutants; disease; and predation by killer whales. The agency will identify habitat essential to the conservation of Cook Inlet belugas in a separate rulemaking within a year.

NOAA expects the final rule on this decision to be published in the Federal Register on Oct.22. A pre publication version of the rule is available now on the Alaska Region's website.

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