



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

National Marine Fisheries Service

P.O. Box 21668

Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

April 21, 2006

Dear Commenter:

We have received your letter concerning the National Marine Fisheries Service's Notice of Intent to initiate a review of the status of the Cook Inlet, Alaska stock of beluga whale. You expressed your interest in Cook Inlet beluga whales and asked us to extend the April 24, 2006 comment deadline.

We have carefully considered your request and will extend the comment period soliciting information on the status review for an additional 30 days. The additional 30 days should allow time for interested parties to complete the compilation of information to be submitted for consideration in the status review. Please refer to the upcoming publication in the Federal Register for the specific period of time the new comment period will open.

Over ten years have now passed since our initial status review of these whales, and during that time the stock has not demonstrated recovery. A final Conservation Plan for the Cook Inlet beluga will be released this summer, and it is our intention to follow the recommendations of that plan by completing the status review in a timely manner. NMFS recognizes the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as one of the primary tools available to foster the recovery of these whales; any plan of action for recovery would be incomplete without proper consideration under the ESA.

Should our review culminate in the recommendation to designate the Cook Inlet beluga whale as a threatened or endangered species, NMFS would proceed with rulemaking to list the species and designate its critical habitat. Further opportunities for public comment will be made available when, and if, a proposed rule to list these whales is published in the Federal Register.

Our Anchorage office staff has been closely involved in the planning actions of the many projects in Cook Inlet and is familiar with the recent research. All recent research studies would be valuable in this rulemaking, and would be especially pertinent to the issue of designation of critical habitat. We appreciate your interest in Cook Inlet beluga whales and we are glad to provide you the extra time to assemble the requested beluga information.

Sincerely,

Kaja Brix
Assistant Regional Administrator
for Protected Resources

