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**NOAA: Cook Inlet Beluga Population Holds Steady from 2007**  
*Scientists Remain Concerned*

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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