



NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE, ALASKA REGION

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NOAA Designates Critical Habitat for Cook Inlet Beluga Whale

NOAA's Fisheries Service today announced it is designating two areas of Alaska's Cook Inlet as critical habitat for the endangered Cook Inlet beluga whale. Scientists estimate there are less than 350 Cook Inlet beluga whales left in the wild. This distinct population segment was listed as endangered in October 2008.

The critical habitat comprises 3,016 square miles (7,809 square kilometers) of marine and estuarine environments considered by scientists to be essential for the whales' survival. These areas contain important biological and physical features for these cetaceans, such as feeding areas near the mouths of salmon streams. Not all of the current range of these whales was found to be critical.



The critical habitat designation, required under the Endangered Species Act, only affects activities that involve a federal permit, license or funding and which may affect critical habitat, such as construction and operation of oil rigs, port construction, dredging, or Environmental Protection Agency-authorized discharges into Cook Inlet.

One designated area includes the upper portions of Cook Inlet, Turnagain Arm and Knik Arm where belugas concentrate in summer months. The other area includes areas where the population congregates in the winter, which includes the middle of Cook-inlet, foraging areas along the western shore of lower Cook Inlet, and Kachemak Bay along east of Cook Inlet near the town of Homer.

NOAA's Fisheries Service has excluded the Port of Anchorage from critical habitat because of its importance to national security, and the Eagle River Flats Range on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson because this area provides benefit to beluga whales under an existing Department of Defense Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan.

NOAA's Fisheries Service based its designation on the results of more than 20 years of research, and has completed an economic analysis on the critical habitat designation. That analysis found that benefits of the designation to beluga whales exceeded the costs.

Public Input

NOAA's Fisheries Service developed the final rule after an extensive public input process which included an initial 60-day comment period on the proposed rule, which was extended an additional 30 days. Four public hearings were also held. As a result of the public hearings and open comment periods, more than 135,000 individual submissions were received. The agency considered all public comments in developing the final rule, and provided responses to all significant issues raised by respondents.

This rule will become effective 30 days after date of publication in the Federal Register.

The final rule, maps, status reviews, and other materials supporting this final rule can be found at <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/>.

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