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**NOAA Recommends Listing Cook Inlet Belugas
Under Endangered Species Act**

The National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service) is proposing to list the Cook Inlet beluga whale population as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The number of beluga whales in Cook Inlet waters near Anchorage has dwindled to an estimated 302 animals and is at risk of going extinct within 100 years.

The population has not achieved the expected growth rate of 2 to 6 percent that is typical of smaller whale populations. In fact, recent data indicate this population has declined 4.1 percent annually since 1999, with a 5.6 percent annual decline since surveys started in 1994. NOAA Fisheries Service estimated Cook Inlet belugas have a 26 percent probability of extinction within 100 years and a 68 percent probability of extinction within 300 years. Cook Inlet belugas are estimated to have numbered as many as 1,300 as recently as the 1970s.

Scientists have not yet answered the question of why the Cook Inlet beluga population is not recovering as anticipated since the subsistence hunt was curtailed in 1999. Hunting has been significantly curtailed (five whales taken since 1999), and other stresses on the Cook Inlet population are comparable to those of beluga populations in Canada and other parts of Alaska.

"We have worked with Alaska Native hunters to attain a manageable level of subsistence harvests in Cook Inlet and hoped this would bring about a recovery within the population" said Doug Mecum, acting administrator for the Alaska Region of NOAA Fisheries Service. "The anticipated recovery has not occurred."

The group *Trustees for Alaska* petitioned NOAA Fisheries in April 2006 to list the Cook Inlet belugas as an endangered species. NOAA Fisheries found the action might be warranted, and prepared the 'Status Review and Extinction Assessment of Cook Inlet belugas (*Delphinapterus leucas*)'. The current recommendation to list the Cook Inlet belugas is based on this review, as well as more than 14 years of NOAA Fisheries Service research on these whales.

The agency will receive public comment on this proposed listing. The comment period ends June 19, 2007. Methods for submitting public comments on the proposed rule will be in the federal register notice, to be posted tomorrow at www.fakr.noaa.gov. Under the Endangered Species Act, NOAA Fisheries Service has one year to finalize the decision to list the Cook Inlet belugas.

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The Endangered Species Act requires designation of critical habitat at the time of listing unless insufficient information exists to identify critical habitat. In such case, the listing agency can extend the time for designation by one year from the date of the final rule listing the species. NOAA Fisheries Service is not proposing to designate critical habitat at this time. Biologists have not yet been able to identify the features of the habitat essential for the conservation of the Cook Inlet Beluga population. Therefore NOAA Fisheries Service plans to use the additional year to identify critical habitat.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat.

The NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is celebrating 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Commission of Fish and Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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On the Web:

NOAA Fisheries Service in Alaska: www.fakr.noaa.gov