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BELUGA WHALE (*Delphinapterus leucas*): Eastern Bering Sea Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Beluga whales are distributed throughout seasonally ice-covered arctic and subarctic waters of the Northern Hemisphere (Gurevich 1980), and are closely associated with open leads and polynyas in ice-covered regions (Hazard 1988). Depending on season and region, beluga whales may occur in both offshore and coastal waters, with concentrations in Cook Inlet, Bristol Bay, the Yukon Delta, Norton Sound, Kasegaluk Lagoon, and the Mackenzie Delta (Hazard 1988). It is assumed that most beluga whales from these summering areas overwinter in the Bering Sea, excluding those found in the northern Gulf of Alaska (Shelden 1994). Seasonal distribution is affected by ice cover, tidal conditions, access to prey, temperature, and human interactions (Lowry 1985).

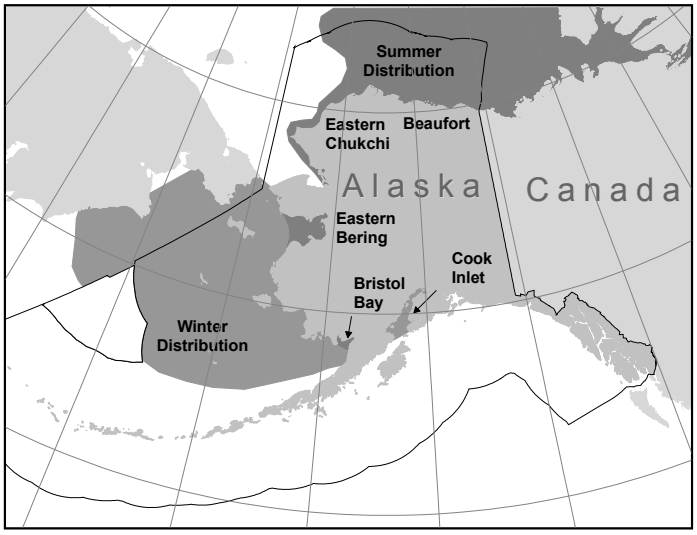

Figure 17. Approximate distribution of beluga whales in Alaska waters. The dark shading displays the summer distribution of the five stocks. Winter distributions are depicted with lighter shading.

The general distribution pattern for beluga whales shows major seasonal changes. During the winter, they occur in offshore waters associated with pack ice. In the spring, they migrate to warmer coastal estuaries, bays, and rivers where they may molt (Finley 1982) and give birth to and care for their calves (Sergeant and Brodie 1969). Annual migrations may cover thousands of kilometers (Reeves 1990).

The following information was considered in classifying beluga whale stock structure based on the Dizon et al. (1992) phylogeographic approach: 1) Distributional data: geographic distribution discontinuous in summer (Frost and Lowry 1990), distribution unknown outside of summer; 2) Population response data: possible extirpation of local populations; distinct population trends between regions occupied in summer; 3) Phenotypic data: unknown; and 4) Genotypic data: mitochondrial DNA analyses indicate distinct differences among summering areas (O'Corry-Crowe et al. 1997). Based on this information, 5 stocks of beluga whales are recognized within U. S. waters: 1) Cook Inlet, 2) Bristol Bay, 3) eastern Bering Sea, 4) eastern Chukchi Sea, and 5) Beaufort Sea (Fig. 17).

POPULATION SIZE

The Alaska Beluga Whale Committee has been working to develop a population estimate for eastern Bering Sea stock beginning with the first systematic aerial surveys of beluga whales in the Norton Sound/Yukon Delta region flown during May, June, and September 1992, and June 1993-1995 (Lowry et al. 1999). Beluga density estimates were calculated for June 1992 surveys using strip transect methods, and for June 1993-1995 using line transect methods. Correction factors were applied to account for animals that were missed during the surveys (those below the surface and not visible, and dark colored neonates). Lowry et al. (1999) concluded that the best estimate of abundance for the eastern Bering Sea beluga stock was 17,675 (95% confidence interval 9,056-34,515 not accounting for variance in correction factors) based on counts made in early June 1995. Additional aerial surveys of the Norton Sound/Yukon Delta region were conducted in June 1999 and 2000 (L. Lowry, pers. comm., 29 January 2011). Unlike previous survey years, in 1999 sea ice persisted in western Norton Sound resulting in a much different distribution of belugas, and the data were not used for population estimation. In 2000 systematic transect lines were flown covering the entire study region, and the data were analyzed using a covariate line transect model. Preliminary results indicate 9,188 belugas (CV=0.42) seen at the surface in the study area (A. Zerbini, AFSC-NMML, pers. comm. 22 December 2010). If the correction factors used previously for this survey region (Lowry et al. 1999) are used (2.62 to correct for the proportion of animals that were diving and thus not visible at the surface and 1.18 to correct for the proportion of newborns and yearlings not observed due to their small size and dark coloration), the total corrected abundance

estimate for the eastern Bering Sea stock is 28,406 (9,188 X 2.62 X 1.18) beluga whales. However, while these results confirm that the eastern Bering Sea beluga stock is quite large they are preliminary and are not ready to use for calculation of PBR at this time.

Minimum Population Estimate

For the eastern Bering Sea stock of beluga whales, the minimum population estimate (N_{MIN}) is calculated according to Equation 1 from the PBR Guidelines (Wade and Angliss 1997). Therefore, $N_{MIN} = N/\exp(0.842\times[\ln(1+[CV(N)]^2)]^{½})$. Using the population estimate (N) of 28,406and an associated CV(N) of 0.42, N_{MIN} for this stock is 20,231 beluga whales. However, because the survey data are greater than 8 years old, it is not considered a reliable minimum population estimate for calculating a PBR.

Current Population Trend

Surveys to estimate population abundance in Norton Sound were not conducted prior to 1992. Annual estimates of population size from surveys flown in 1992-95 and 1999-2000 have varied widely, due partly to differences in survey coverage and conditions between years. Data currently available do not allow an evaluation of population trend for the Eastern Bering Sea stock.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

A reliable estimate of the maximum net productivity rate is currently unavailable for the eastern Bering Sea stock of beluga whales. Lowry et al. (2008) estimated the rate of increase of the Bristol Bay beluga stock as was 4.8% per year (95% CI = 2.1%-7.5%) over a 12-year period. However, until additional data become available specific to the eastern Bering Sea stock, it is recommended that the cetacean maximum theoretical net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) of 4% be employed for this stock (Wade and Angliss 1997).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Under the 1994 reauthorized Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the potential biological removal (PBR) is defined as the product of the minimum population estimate, one-half the maximum theoretical net productivity rate, and a recovery factor: $PBR = N_{MIN} \times 0.5R_{MAX} \times F_R$. The recovery factor ($F_R$) for this stock is 1.0, the value for cetacean stocks that are thought to be stable in the presence of a subsistence harvest (Wade and Angliss 1997). The Alaska SRG recommended using a F_R of 1.0 for this stock to estimate abundance for this stock and to annually monitor levels of subsistence harvest (DeMaster 1997). However, the 2005 revisions to the SAR guidelines (NMFS 2005) state that abundance estimates older than 8 years should not be used to calculate PBR due to a decline in confidence in the reliability of an aged abundance estimate. Therefore, the PBR for the eastern Bering Sea stock of beluga whales is considered undetermined.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fisheries Information

In previous assessments, there were three different federally observed commercial fisheries in Alaska that could have had incidental serious injuries or mortalities of eastern Bering Sea beluga whales. In 2004, the definitions of these commercial fisheries were changed to reflect target species; this new definition has resulted in the identification of several observed fisheries in the Bering Sea that use trawl, longline, or pot gear. There have been no observed serious injuries or mortalities in any of these commercial fisheries.

In the nearshore waters of the eastern Bering Sea, substantial effort occurs in commercial and subsistence fisheries, mostly for salmon and herring. The salmon fishery uses gillnet gear similar to that used in Bristol Bay where it is known that belugas have been incidentally taken (Frost et al. 1984). However there are no useful data on beluga incidental takes from this stock because there have never been observer programs on the commercial fisheries and there is no reporting requirement for takes in personal use fisheries. The only reported beluga mortality in this region occurred in a personal-use king salmon gillnet in 1996. NMFS assumes that all beluga whales killed are used for subsistence, regardless of the method of harvest, are reported to the ABWC, and included in the following section on Subsistence/Native Harvest Information.

Because there has never been an observer program for nearshore commercial fisheries in the eastern Bering Sea region, a reliable estimate of the mortality rate incidental to commercial fisheries is currently unavailable.

Subsistence/Native Harvest Information

The subsistence take of beluga whales from the eastern Bering Sea stock is provided by the ABWC. The most recent subsistence harvest estimates for the stock are provided in Table 22 (Frost and Suydam in press; Alaska Beluga Whale Committee, pers. comm., 18 February 2010). Belugas harvested in Kuskokwim villages are included in the total harvest for the eastern Bering Sea beluga stock. The annual subsistence take by Alaska Natives averaged 192 belugas landed from the eastern Bering Sea stock during the 5-year period 2005-2009. .

Table 22. Summary of the number of belugas landed by the Alaska Native subsistence harvest from the eastern Bering Sea stock of beluga whales, 2005-2009.

Year	Reported total number landed
2005	259
2006	172
2007	232
2008	119
2009	181
Mean annual number of animals landed (2005-2009):	192.6

STATUS OF STOCK

The estimated minimum annual mortality rate incidental to U.S. commercial fisheries is 0. Because the PBR is undetermined, the level of annual U.S. commercial fishery-related mortality that can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate is unknown. The total estimated annual human-caused mortality rate is 193 based on subsistence harvest. Eastern Bering Sea beluga whales are not listed as "depleted" under the MMPA or listed as "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act. Although the abundance estimates are greater than 8 years old and PBR is undetermined, the level of incidental mortality in commercial fisheries is unknown, although it is considered to be insignificant based on no reports. Therefore the Eastern Bering Sea stock of beluga whales is classified as a non-strategic stock.

HABITAT CONCERNS

Evidence indicates that the Arctic climate is changing significantly and that one result of the change is a reduction in the extent of sea ice in at least some regions of the Arctic (ACIA 2004, Johannessen et al 2004). These changes are likely to affect marine mammal species in the Arctic. Ice-associated animals, such as the beluga whale, may be sensitive to changes in Arctic weather, sea-surface temperatures, or ice extent, and the concomitant effect on prey availability. Currently, there are insufficient data to make reliable predictions of the effects of Arctic climate change on beluga whales, but Laidre et al. (2008) and Heide-Jørgensen (2010) concluded that on a worldwide basis belugas were likely to be less sensitive to climate change than other arctic cetaceans because of their wide distribution and flexible behavior. Increased human activity in the Arctic, including increasing oil and gas exploration and development, and increased nearshore development, have the potential to impact habitat for beluga whales (Moore et al. 2000, Lowry et al. 2006), but predicting the type and magnitude of the impacts is difficult at this time.

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