

# COOK INLET KEEPER ? ALASKA AUDUBON

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## PRESS RELEASE

### Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Needs Habitat Protection

*NMFS Releases New Population Estimates; Numbers Down*

HOMER – Today the National Marine Fisheries Service released new population estimates for the Cook Inlet beluga whale. The latest abundance estimate is 278 remaining belugas whales in Cook Inlet, down 88 whales from the 2004 estimate of 366 whales. According to NMFS, the abundance estimate means the actual population size can be as few as 194 whales, or as many as 398 individuals. The whale is listed as “depleted” under the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act, and NMFS is currently reviewing whether a listing under the Endangered Species Act is warranted.

“With the tight controls on subsistence hunting over the past 7 years, agency experts predicted the beluga population would rebound,” said Bob Shavelson, Executive Director of Cook Inlet Keeper. “But it hasn’t. In fact, it may very well be declining. So there must be other impacts occurring that are going unchecked. That’s why NMFS should act immediately to designate and protect habitats important to the whale.”

“The Cook Inlet Beluga population has become so small and vulnerable that any number of natural or human caused impacts could place it in significant jeopardy of extinction.” said Dr. John Schoen, Senior Scientist for Audubon Alaska. “Even a substantial stranding event or predation by killer whales could result in a further population decline that could be difficult to reverse. Clearly, this is a population that should be protected under the Endangered Species Act. As Alaskans we need to work together to ensure the restoration of this high-profile marine mammal population.”

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Cook Inlet Keeper is a member-supported nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting the Cook Inlet watershed and the life it sustains. Keeper maintains offices in Anchorage and Homer. See [www.inletkeeper.org](http://www.inletkeeper.org) for more information

Audubon Alaska has over 2,400 members and supporters and is the Alaska State Office of the National Audubon Society. See [www.audubonalaska.org](http://www.audubonalaska.org) for more information.