



NOAA

**NATIONAL OCEANIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION**
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Sept. 25, 2008

NOAA: Cook Inlet Beluga Population Holds Steady from 2007

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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