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Impacts of Cook Inlet Beluga decision

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska (KTVA-CBS 11 News)

With the federal government looking to add another layer of protection for the Cook Inlet belugas, the designation has the potential to affect some of Alaska's resource developments.

"A mine, a road, a pipeline, a port, a power transmission," said Mike Heatwole, of The Pebble Partnership.

"All of those projects all of those ongoing economic development activities, could be impacted with no added benefit to the belugas," said Jason Brune, of the Resource Development Council, an organization that represents various industries throughout the state.

"What it will mean is coming up in the future when new activities are proposed they will have to consider the impact on Cook Inlet belugas," said Rebecca Noblin, of the Center for Biological Diversity, which was among several groups that petitioned the federal government to list the belugas as endangered.

But if this decision on the beluga is final, projects like the Pebble Partnership might have to go back to the drawing board.

"The beluga was already listed and now we got the critical habitat designation and so it kind of adds two phases that we have to address once we have a development plan," said Heatwole.

The potential economic and energy impact of the Pebble Mine is considered huge, which is why officials are hoping the beluga proposal isn't approved so the project can continue to be on track.

"Bringing power to rural Alaska where they are paying 3,4,5, ten times the amount per kilowatt hour that we pay here in Anchorage, projects like pebble, creek, and others could bring cheap power to rural Alaska," said Brune.

"Anytime you add time and cost to a project, that can ultimately affect the bottom line and that has to be weighed as we look at things like this," said Heatwole.

Officials say the proposal also could be a potential threat to oil and gas exploration and development in Cook Inlet, which would affect Alaska's energy future. According to those who are against the beluga proposal, it would put a stop to how we are getting our oil and gas from Cook Inlet. And without oil and gas, how we heat, eat, drive, and do business could mean a very large price tag in the future.

When it comes to protecting Cook Inlet's belugas from extinction, you'll hear no complaints.

"We all care about the ultimate recovery of the Cook Inlet beluga whales," said Brune.

But with protections in place already, the question for some is how the new proposal will help the whales, who already have been living among the Cook Inlet's various activities.

"The peak population of belugas was a beluga population that their entire lives had lived with oil and gas exploration and development, had lived with transportation, had lived with community development," said Brune.

This co existence is why those in the oil and gas industry say imposing new stricter restrictions would change the landscape of our state.

"Having critical habitat designations is not going to help us increase the amount of oil we get from Cook Inlet, in fact its going to do the opposite, its going to decrease the amount oil, its going to make us more dependent on foreign sources of oil and importing oil," said Brune.

Not so says those in favor of the critical habitat designation.

"Its not likely to impact daily activities in the port, what it could impact is big, if we want to dredge and fill, then the government is going to have to consider the impact on beluga whales, that just makes sense, its not going to impact day to day shipping activities," said Noblin.

But with the list of those day-to-day activities long, the argument remains how this decision would impact all of us.

"We are going to see our costs of goods go up, not just in Anchorage, but across the state, we are going to see fewer folks coming investing in Anchorage, Cook Inlet and fewer jobs ultimately," said Brune.

"What it will mean is coming up in the future when new activities are proposed they will have to consider the impact on Cook Inlet belugas, that doesn't mean they have to stop building the Knik Arm Bridge, they just have to consider how that's going to affect belugas and design in such a way so it doesn't harm the belugas," said Noblin.

You can weigh in on the federal decision to name Cook Inlet a critical habitat up until January 31st when the public comment period ends. We've set up a link on our links page.

To contact the Newsroom, call 907-274-1111.