

## Cook Inlet Beluga Whales: 3,000 Square Miles of Critical Habitat Proposed

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**The National Marine Fisheries Service has proposed to designate over 3,000 square miles of critical habitat for endangered Cook Inlet beluga whales.**

Good news for critically endangered Cook Inlet beluga whales: The Center for Biological Diversity announced today that over 3,000 square miles of critical habitat has been proposed by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

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Unfortunately, the Cook Inlet beluga whale population has plummeted in recent years. An October 2009 population survey found only 321 whales. Even in the 1980's, there were reportedly as few as 1,300 of this imperiled species. Cook Inlet beluga whale numbers were slashed by overhunting, and now the species is failing to recover, most likely as a result of increasing industrial activities in Alaska.

Cook Inlet is the most populated and fastest-growing watershed in Alaska, and is subject to significant proposed offshore oil and gas development in beluga habitat.

Additionally, the proposed Knik Arm Bridge, a billion-dollar boondoggle, will directly affect some of the whale's most important habitat. Port expansion and a proposed giant coal mine and coal export dock would also destroy key beluga habitat.

Senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity Brendan Cummings noted via today's release that although the proposal is a welcome step in the right direction for the Cook Inlet belugas, industrial development needs to be curtailed.

If we quickly act to designate and protect the critical habitat of the Cook Inlet beluga, this highly imperiled whale has a real chance of recovery.

While today's proposal is an important step toward protecting the Cook Inlet beluga, protections for the species remain far from complete, Critical habitat designation should be promptly finalized and expanded to include the lower Inlet. Moreover, the Fisheries Service needs to prepare a recovery plan and stop so freely handing out permits to industry allowing the beluga's habitat to be developed and disturbed."

### **Meanwhile, anti-wildlife policies still going strong in Alaska governor's office**

Despite the objections of former Alaska governor Sarah Palin, the Cook Inlet beluga whale received endangered species protection in October of 2008 - thanks to the efforts of conservationists and environmental organizations such as the Center for Biological Diversity.

Although Palin threatened to sue the federal government to overturn the Cook Inlet beluga whale's endangered listing, she has now apparently moved on to a better fit in the tabloid circuit.

Alaska's current governor, Sean Parnell, appears to harbor the same disdain for the environment, vowing to fight proposed polar bear protections. He claims that designating critical habitat for the polar bear would impede exploratory oil drilling in Alaska.

### **How to help critically endangered Cook Inlet beluga whales**

The Cook Inlet beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*) is a distinct subpopulation of beluga whale and is classified by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as Critically Endangered.

Learn more about how you can help at:

- [Cook Inletkeeper](#)
- [Center for Biological Diversity](#)
- [Defenders of Wildlife](#)

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