

# AlaskaDispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

## Alaska's Cook Inlet beluga whales get habitat protection

By Patti Epler

The federal government has designated more than 3,000 square miles of Cook Inlet as protected habitat for beluga whales.

The federal government has designated more than 3,000 square miles of Cook Inlet as critical habitat for beluga whales, carving out exemptions for the Port of Anchorage and military installations.

The listing has been in the works since 2009, after environmental groups threatened to sue to prod the government into taking action to protect the whale from looming development in the Anchorage region. The whale has been listed as endangered since 2008 but the federal government never followed up with designating critical habitat and crafting a recovery plan.

The National Marine Fisheries Service has estimated that the Cook Inlet population of belugas has dropped from about 1,300 to about 300.



The newly designated habitat areas include upper Cook Inlet, the coastal areas of western Cook Inlet and most of Kachemak Bay.

Rebecca Noblin, the Alaska director for the Center for Biological Diversity, hailed the habitat designation as an important victory for the belugas.

"The designation of critical habitat for the Cook Inlet beluga whale gives this highly imperiled whale a real chance of recovery," Noblin said in a press release. "The Fisheries Service has thrown Cook Inlet belugas a much-needed lifeline."

The designation means that federal agencies are prohibited from taking actions that might change the habitat in a way that harms the endangered population. Federal agencies are required to consult on permit applications, for instance, to make sure the critical habitat designation is being upheld.

The designation comes a few days after the state Department of Natural Resources announced it would hold a lease sale in Cook Inlet in June, offering acreage that would support oil and gas development operations.

Brendan Cummings, senior counsel for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the critical habitat designation and the rules it creates only apply to federal agencies. So it wouldn't have any effect on the lease sale. But, he said, it could come into play if federal permits are required for any drilling operations in Cook Inlet, such as seismic work which generally requires a federal permit or siting of a drill rig that usually need a Corps of Engineers approval.

"Future development on those leases could be affected," Cummings said.

Noblin noted that other developments in the Inlet near Anchorage also could have an impact on the whales, including the proposed, billion-dollar Knik Arm Bridge will directly affect some of the whale's most important habitat, she said.

Port expansion and a proposed giant coal mine and coal-export dock would also destroy key beluga habitat, Noblin contends.

"While today's designation is an important step toward saving the Cook Inlet beluga, protections for the species remain far from complete," said Noblin. "The Fisheries Service must quickly finalize a recovery plan and must stop approving permits that allow

for the destruction of important beluga habitat in Cook Inlet."

The fisheries service has been criticized for listing the whales as endangered and its consideration of the critical habitat designation by state officials, Anchorage Mayor Dan Sullivan, the state's congressional delegation and business groups. They were concerned about the effect on shipping operations at the port but the new designation accommodates that area as well as adjacent military operations.

The state filed suit to challenge the listing and that case is still pending in federal court.

"In its ongoing attack on wildlife, the state of Alaska has repeatedly shown a willingness to choose politics over science," said Noblin. "All evidence shows that Cook Inlet belugas are in serious trouble and desperately need the protections of the Endangered Species Act to survive and recover."

State officials weren't immediately available for comment Friday morning.