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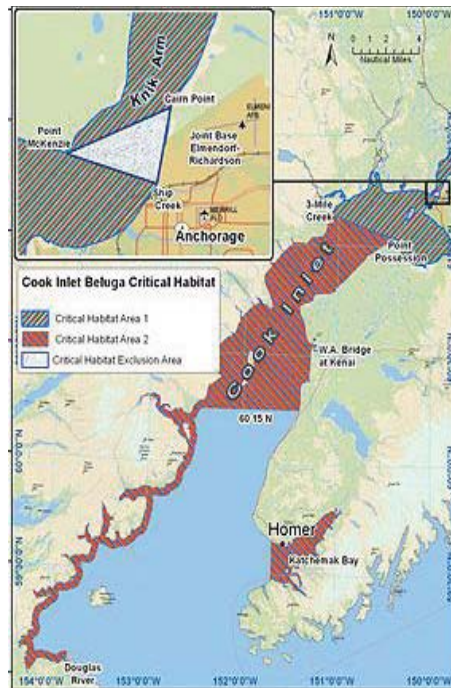
## Critical habitat finalized for Cook Inlet belugas

- MARY PEMBERTON

ANCHORAGE, Alaska - Nearly 2 million acres off Alaska's largest city were designated Friday as critical marine habitat for beluga whales, a move that critics say could cripple the state's development but conservationists say will put the endangered mammals "on the road to recovery."

The designation for 3,013 square miles in Cook Inlet means that federal agencies will be prohibited from taking any actions in the area that could hurt chances that the whales eventually will recover. The National Marine Fisheries Service's rule excludes the Port of Anchorage.

Government scientists say about 340 beluga whales are in Cook Inlet, a small increase from last year but far below the 1,300 belugas estimated in the 1980s. The initial decline in belugas was blamed on overfishing by



Alaska Natives, but subsistence harvest has been reduced to few animals, if any, for years and yet the whales have not recovered.

The white whales were declared endangered in 2008. Their numbers have declined by about 1 percent a year, compared with species in recovery, which grow by between 2 and 4 percent a year, government scientists say. The reasons for the whales' continuing decline are not clear.

The Center for Biological Diversity, a conservation organization that helped wage a legal fight to get federal protection for the whales, said the decision on critical habitat puts the whales "on the road to recovery."

Species that receive critical habitat are more than twice as likely to recover, said Rebecca Noblin, the center's Alaska director. She likened the critical habitat designation as throwing Cook Inlet belugas "a much-needed lifeline."

The details of the designation were similar to those from a proposed rule, with the exception that it excluded the port. It also exempted some military lands. The federal agency said it chose the final rule out of several options after an extensive process that included an initial 60-day comment period on the proposed rule was extended an additional 30 days. Four public hearings were held,

and the agency received more than 135,000 submissions from individuals.

The state of Alaska fought for the port's exclusion over concerns that development and the state's economy would be hurt if the waters off Anchorage were designated as critical habitat.

Sen. Mark Begich, D-Alaska, who served as Anchorage mayor, said that he was pleased the port was excluded but remained concerned that the critical habitat designation would cripple development in Alaska.

"The decision is unjustified by science or economics," Begich said. The designation could stall or shut down projects from north of Anchorage to the Kenai Peninsula, he said.

Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, said the designation will jeopardize energy development projects in Cook Inlet.

"This designation comes only a few days after lease sales in the Cook Inlet were announced, and will now inevitably be used to shut down production in that area," he said.

The fisheries' service conducted an extensive economic analysis as part of the designation process and found that adverse economic impacts would be minimal. Designation of critical habitat was required as part of a recovery plan for the whales.