

## NOAA Identifies Cook Inlet Critical Habitat for Beluga Whales

By Chris Klint

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska -

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration released a final rule designating more than 3,000 square miles of Cook Inlet as critical habitat for beluga whales Friday morning.

According to the Center for Biological Diversity, which praises the designation, the habitat area is similar to one proposed in 2009 but clears small areas around the Port of Anchorage and Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson's Eagle River Flats Range.

The ruling comes after a 2008 decision by NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service to list the beluga whale as an endangered species. When the service didn't designate critical habitat for Cook Inlet belugas within the next year -- as required by the Endangered Species Act -- the Center for Biological Diversity threatened to sue in October 2009, prompting a habitat designation that December.

"The designation of critical habitat for the Cook Inlet beluga whale gives this highly imperiled whale a real chance of recovery," said the center's Rebecca Noblin. "Overall the rule is excellent and is an important step towards beluga recovery."

While Alaska's congressional delegation was swift to praise the open areas near the port and JBER, all three of its members expressed concern about the revised critical habitat's economic impacts.

"I understand the beluga habitat needs protection, but I have serious concerns with NOAA's figures to justify it," said Sen. Lisa Murkowski. "The costs involved are 100 times higher than they're estimating. Beyond their bad math, I remain extremely concerned the critical habitat designation will lead to something all too common to Alaska: more delays in permitting, construction and protracted litigation."

"While I am pleased NOAA exempted the Port of Anchorage, as I requested, I am still very concerned designating 3,000 square miles of critical habitat for beluga whales could be crippling to Alaska development," said Sen. Mark Begich. "The decision is unjustified by science or economics. The designation could stall or shut down projects from the Mat-Su to Anchorage to the Kenai Peninsula."

"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," said Rep. Don Young. "These designations have

become purely political and an excuse to shut down production, and are no longer strictly the conservation tool they were originally meant to be.”

Several hearings for public comment on the habitat designation were held in Anchorage and the Mat-Su Valley early last year. Opponents of the designation claimed it would threaten several coastal projects in the region, while supporters said those fears were overblown.

“It could have an impact on fishing, on mining, on oil and gas exploration and development, on the Knik Arm Bridge, on vessel traffic in and out of Anchorage,” said Jason Brune with the Resource Development Council last February.

“The critical habitat designation is an important step and you know, there’s been a lot of rhetoric, a lot of fear-mongering, a lot of arm-waving, the-sky-is-falling kind of stuff that the designation of the critical habitat area is going to somehow shut down industry,” said Bob Shavelson of the Cook Inletkeeper.

The State of Alaska sued the NMFS last year, challenging the belugas’ endangered-species designation. At a November conference hosted by the Resource Development Council, then-Attorney General Dan Sullivan said the state had an obligation to step in when environmental groups sued federal agencies.

The habitat designation goes into effect 30 days after it is published in the Federal Register, which is slated to happen Monday.