

Protected habitat designated for endangered belugas

- Yereth Rosen

(Reuters) - Over 3,000 square miles of Alaska marine area will be protected as critical habitat for a population of endangered beluga whales, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Service announced on Friday.

The critical habitat being designated to help the belugas encompasses most of the northern third of Cook Inlet, a glacier-fed saltwater channel that runs from the Anchorage area to the Gulf of Alaska.

Also designated as critical habitat is Kachemak Bay, off the fishing town of Homer, and most of the inlet's southwestern coastline, NOAA's Fisheries Service announced.

Those areas are heavily used by the small white whales for congregating and summer feeding, NOAA Fisheries said.

Cook Inlet belugas are famous for swimming in large groups along the coastline of Anchorage and other urbanized areas.

Scientists estimate the inlet population numbered up to 1,300 in the 1980s before numbers crashed in the 1990s due to over-hunting by the area's Alaska Natives, who are allowed under federal law to hunt marine mammals for traditional uses.

Even though hunting nearly ended over the past decade, NOAA analysis found the population continued to falter. Cook Inlet belugas were listed as endangered in 2008.

Currently, only 350 Cook Inlet belugas remain, and reproduction has been poor, according to NOAA analysis.



Aurora, a 20-year-old Beluga whale, swims with her newborn calf after giving birth at the Vancouver Aquarium in Vancouver, British Columbia June 7, 2009. Aurora was in labour for about three hours before delivering the calf.

Under the Endangered Species Act, critical habitat must be designated and protected for any listed species, unless that habitat cannot be identified.

Scientists are still investigating the reasons for the whales' failure to recover population strength. Possible causes include underwater noise from commercial shipping or offshore oil and gas operations, pollutants swept into the inlet by urban runoff or depletion of the region's salmon, which is an important food source for belugas.

Environmentalists were pleased with the habitat designation, which will go into effect 30 days after the rule is published in the Federal Register on Monday.

"It's an excellent designation. It's good news for the belugas," said Rebecca Noblin, Alaska director for the Center for Biological Diversity.

Critical habitat designation will likely mean additional protections to curb

water and air pollution, helping local fishermen, tour operators and others, Noblin said.

"If we protect Cook Inlet for belugas, we're also protecting it for the people who live around Cook Inlet."

But business groups were unhappy with the designation and the development restrictions that may result from it.

The designation of critical habitat, and the endangered listing that underlies it, could constrict oil and gas drilling, commercial fishing, shipping, urban construction and several major projects such as a planned bridge from Anchorage across Knik Inlet, they argue.

"This listing will have no positive effect on the belugas and it'll only have a negative impact on economic activities that have been going on since statehood," said Jason Brune, executive director of the Resource Development Council for Alaska.