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Trump Administration Permits Hilcorp Alaska to Harm Marine Mammals in Cook Inlet

Offshore Drilling Threatens Endangered Beluga Whales, Sea Otters

ANCHORAGE— The Trump administration issued final rules **today** allowing Hilcorp Alaska to harm beluga whales, sea otters and other marine mammals as the company expands its offshore drilling activities in Alaska's Cook Inlet.

These Marine Mammal Protection Act "take authorizations" allow more than 15,530 instances of harm to marine mammals from Hilcorp's seismic blasting, pile driving and other construction and oil-exploration activities over the next five years. Hilcorp bought **14 new federal leases** in Cook Inlet in 2017, shortly after failing to control an **underwater gas leak** from its pipeline there for nearly four months.

"It's appalling to see the Trump administration allowing Hilcorp to launch an acoustic attack on Cook Inlet belugas in search of oil we shouldn't be drilling anyway," said Kristen Monsell, oceans legal director with the Center for Biological Diversity. "These endangered whales may not survive Hilcorp's assault. Only about 320 of these smart, sensitive animals remain, and they don't deserve to be blasted and harassed by this company."

Hilcorp Alaska has been **repeatedly fined** for safety violations by Alaska regulators, who wrote that "disregard for regulatory compliance is endemic to Hilcorp's approach to its Alaska operations." The company is also trying to build an offshore drilling island in Alaska's Beaufort Sea, but the Center and other groups have **filed a lawsuit** challenging approval of that project.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act generally prohibits killing, harming or harassing a marine mammal. The statute allows the federal government to authorize certain industrial activities to harm and harass marine mammals, provided such activities will take only a "small number" of animals and have no more than a "negligible impact" on the population.

The rules were issued separately today by the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which together have jurisdiction over all the affected marine mammals.

A Fisheries Service **study** last year found that human-caused sounds reach Cook Inlet belugas every single day, interfering with their communications and resting. Seismic blasting used in oil exploration, which can reach 250 decibels and be heard for miles, are the loudest human-caused noises in the ocean. It can cause hearing loss in marine mammals, disturb essential behaviors such as feeding and breeding, mask communications between individual whales, and reduce catch rates of commercial fish.