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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
December 1, 2009

**NOAA Proposes Critical Habitat for Cook Inlet Beluga Whales**  
*Agency to hold public meeting/accepting comments*

NOAA's Fisheries Service is seeking public comment on a proposal that identifies more than a third of Cook Inlet in Alaska as critical habitat for the remaining approximately 300 endangered Cook Inlet beluga whales.

In October 2008, NOAA's Fisheries Service listed Cook Inlet beluga whales as endangered. Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), NOAA's Fisheries Service must designate critical habitat for all listed species.

"We have used the best available science and the traditional knowledge of Alaska natives to identify areas essential to helping Cook Inlet beluga whales survive," said Doug Mecum, acting administrator of NOAA's Fisheries Service Alaska region. "Protecting these endangered whales is one of our top priorities."

The ESA requires designation of critical habitat whenever a species is listed for protection. Federal agencies must consult with NOAA's Fisheries Service to ensure that they do not fund, authorize, or carry out a project that will destroy or adversely modify the critical habitat. This requirement does not apply to activities on private land that do not involve a federal agency, permit or funding.

Managers expect to have a final designation of critical habitat for the Cook Inlet beluga whales in the spring of 2010.

The NOAA's Fisheries Service proposal designates a total of 3,016 square miles, including the upper portions of Cook Inlet, where whales concentrate in summer months, mid-Cook Inlet, the western shore of lower Cook Inlet and Kachemak Bay on the eastern side of the lower inlet.

NOAA's Fisheries Service experts believe Cook Inlet beluga whales once numbered more than 1,300, but only around 300 remain, according to the latest population estimates completed in June. NOAA's Fisheries Service biologists and scientists have surveyed the Cook Inlet beluga whale, estimated the species' abundance and reviewed the population's status. They have also collected tissue samples, carried out necropsies on whales found dead and responded to beluga whale strandings.

In their formal status review of Cook Inlet beluga whales, NOAA's Fisheries Service scientists estimated a 26 percent chance that these whales will become extinct in the next 100 years.

Cook Inlet belugas are one of five populations of belugas recognized within U.S. waters. The other beluga populations, which are not listed as threatened or endangered, summer in Bristol Bay, the eastern Bering Sea, the eastern Chukchi Sea and the Beaufort Sea. Of the five populations of beluga whales in Alaska, the Cook Inlet population is considered to be the most isolated based on the degree of genetic differentiation and geographic distance between the Cook Inlet population and the four other beluga populations.

The recovery of Cook Inlet whales is potentially hindered by severe stranding events; continued development within and along upper Cook Inlet; industrial and municipal activities that discharge or accidentally spill pollutants; disease; predation by killer whales and losses of available prey to fishing or loss of prey habitat. Protecting habitat is essential to the beluga whales' recovery.

Comments on the proposed critical habitat area must be received by January 31, 2010. Send comments to: Assistant Regional Administrator, Protected Resources, Alaska Region, NOAA Fisheries, ATTN: Ellen Sebastian. Comments must be identified by "RIN 0648-AX50" and sent by any one of the following methods:

- Electronic submissions: Submit all electronic public comments via the Federal eRulemaking Portal website at <http://www.regulations.gov>.
- Mail: P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK, 99802-1668.
- Fax: 907-586-7557
- Hand deliver to the Federal Building: 709 West 9<sup>th</sup> Street, Room 420A, Juneau, AK.

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On the Web:

NOAA Fisheries Service in Alaska: <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov>