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## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Recovery Plan's Criteria for Recovery are Unrealistic**

(Juneau) – The Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Recovery Plan finalized today by the National Marine Fisheries Service contains untenable recovery criteria that could impede status updates, limit stakeholder acceptance, and unnecessarily extend regulatory hurdles to development.

“The most critical action for recovering the Cook Inlet belugas will be to determine why the population isn’t growing,” said Division of Wildlife Conservation Director Bruce Dale. “The threats limiting recovery are unknown.”

Considered a distinct population segment, Cook Inlet beluga whales historically numbered between 1,000 to 2,000 animals. The population declined to a few hundred in the late 1990s, due largely to unsustainable subsistence harvests during the mid-1990s. Subsistence harvests were reduced in 1999, but the population has failed to rebound. In response to petitioning by Cook Inletkeeper and others, the NMFS listed Cook Inlet beluga whales in 2008 as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Surveys in 2010-2014 have since placed the population at 284 to 340 animals.

Under the NMFS recovery plan, Cook Inlet belugas would be down-listed to threatened status when the population reaches 40 percent of their historic environmental carrying capacity (estimated in the plan as 1,300 whales) and delisted when numbers reach 60 percent carrying capacity. These demographic criteria are problematic because the number of animals in a population is not necessarily an indication of the risk of extinction. Further, the plan includes threats-based recovery criteria that are not measurable and impossible to meet. These issues make delisting Cook Inlet beluga whales under the recovery plan unattainable, which will necessitate a bureaucratically difficult delisting outside of the plan.

To the NMFS’s credit, the recovery plan emphasizes adaptive management, a flexible strategy through which management actions are revised according to new research findings and the response of the beluga population to previous management actions. The NMFS recognizes the plan will require regular updates to account for new information and (hopefully) increased understanding of why Cook Inlet belugas have not recovered.

The State of Alaska is committed to the conservation of Cook Inlet beluga whales.

“We will work with our industry, municipal, and conservation partners to recover this distinct whale population while minimizing the impacts to economic and other activities,” said Dale, adding “The state has the expertise and a firm understanding of what will be required to successfully lead a recovery effort with broad support.”

Recovering and delisting the Cook Inlet beluga whales will lift ESA regulatory burdens off one of Alaska's most economically important areas and ensure the health of a cultural and subsistence icon. The State's goal is for a healthy beluga population with a well-managed, sustainable subsistence hunt.

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