

BANQUET SPEAKER: THE ENDANGERED BELUGAS OF COOK INLET

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ABSTRACT

There is new information on the health of the Cook Inlet beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*) population. These whales reside year-round in the waters of the Cook Inlet in Alaska, where they are accessible to residents and visitors of Anchorage, the state's largest city and home to 42% of Alaska's human population. Concern about the high level of human-caused mortality on the small population of belugas prompted the National Marine Fisheries Service to designate the Cook Inlet beluga whales as depleted under the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1999. With an estimated decline of nearly 50% between 1994 and 1999, the Cook Inlet population has remained between 300 and 400 animals since 1999. The failure of the population to recover led to an endangered listing under the U.S. Endangered Species Act in October 2008. However, the population still shows no sign of recovery and currently numbers around 350 whales.

Keywords: beluga whales, Alaska, endangered species, marine mammals