



Cook Inlet Beluga Whales

- **Cook Inlet beluga whales are an endangered species.**

Beluga whales live all over the Arctic. The small population occurring in Cook Inlet is isolated and genetically distinct from other populations.

Cook Inlet's beluga population fell to fewer than 300 whales in the 1990's. Scientists attribute the decline to overharvesting by subsistence hunters. Hunting belugas was stopped in 1998, but their population has not rebounded as anticipated and continues to stagnate. As a result, the federal government listed the Cook Inlet beluga population as "endangered".



- **Scientists are working to build a better understanding of beluga whale ecology.**

The recovery of the local beluga population may be hindered due to predation by orca whales, occurrences of stranding's and beaching's, and other disturbances, which could include noise from human development activities, as well as the discharge from municipal wastewater treatment facilities.

A team of experts is engaged in development of a Recovery Plan to better understand and mitigate the limitations to recovery of the population.

- **The Asplund Wastewater Treatment Facility discharges into beluga habitat.**

The Utility's John M. Asplund Wastewater Treatment Facility provides treatment for all of the wastewater collected in the Anchorage Bowl. The facility discharges into Cook Inlet in accordance with a permit issued by the federal government. The government is currently considering renewal of the permit, and is required by law to evaluate the effects of the permit renewal on beluga whales.

- **The Utility is contributing to understanding beluga whale ecology.**

Working closely with federal authorities, the Utility produced a Biological Evaluation report, completed in 2011. The work included modeling of tides and mixing of wastewater discharge throughout upper Cook Inlet, and the potential for exposure of whales and their prey to trace contaminants from the discharge.

The report concluded that the level of harmful contaminants in the Asplund discharge is very low and that the discharge does not pose a hazard to the whales. Permit renewal is not likely to adversely affect the recovery of the population.

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