Alaska Beluga Whale Committee

Tom Gray, **Chairman** (907-304-2003)
Leonard Barger, Vice Chair (907-759-3454)
Kathy Frost, Secretary (808-987-0001)
Billy Adams, Officer at Large (907-852-0350)
Cyrus Harris, Officer at Large (907-350-7835)

2024 AGENDA

Wednesday – Thursday 13, 14 November 2024 Anchorage Hilton Hotel

Wednesday – Day 1

Meeting starts at 8:30

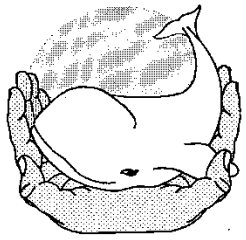
1. **Invocation**
2. **Introduction of members, guests, and students**
3. **Minutes and agenda -** Review, correct, and approve minutes from November 2023 meeting and the agenda
4. **Funding, partner, meeting and committee reports**
   A. Funding report (John Citta)
   B. NMFS Alaska Region report (Anne-Marie Eich or Barbara Mahoney)
   C. NMFS Marine Mammal Lab (John Bengston)
   D. Inuvialuit-Inupiat Beluga Whale Commission meeting update and Beluga Summit (John Citta, Billy Adams)
5. **Alcohol incident 2023** (Tom Gray)
6. **Alaska regional reports and harvest reports** (Hunter delegates)
   A. Statewide beluga harvests plus struck & lost, 2014-2023 (Kathy Frost)
   B. North Slope (Barrow, Wainwright, Point Lay, Point Hope, Kaktovik, Nuiqsut, Diomede)
   C. Kotzebue Sound (Buckland, Deering, Kivalina, Kotzebue/Sisualik, Noatak, Shishmaref)
   D. Norton Sound (Nome, Brevig Mission, Golovin, White Mt., Elim, Shaktoolik, Koyuk, Unalakleet, St. Michael, Stebbins)
   E. Yukon (Alakanuk, Emmonak, Hooper Bay, Kotlik, Mountain Village, Nunam Iqua, Pilot Station, Pitka's Point, Saint Mary's, Scammon Bay, Chevak, Marshall, Russian Mission)
   F. Kuskokwim (AVCP, Platinum, Toksook Bay, Quinhagak, other)
   G. Bristol Bay (Aleknagek, Dillingham, Manokotak; Bristol Bay overall report –Levelock, Clark's Point, etc.)
7. **Abundance estimates**
   A. Eastern Bering Sea - brief summary report of 2024, status of final results 2017 & 2022 (John Bengtson)
   B. Beaufort Sea 2019 abundance estimate: what next (John Citta)
   C. Eastern Chukchi Sea and Beaufort 2025 (John Citta, John Bengtson)
   D. Using satellites to count belugas (John Bengtson)
8. **ABWC Projects**
   A. Recent genetics sample analysis and what's next (Greg O'Corry-Crowe)
   B. Beluga stomach analysis and diet projects (Lori Quakenbush)
   C. Drone studies of body condition, Point Hope & Point Lay (Madi Kosma)
9. **Other beluga projects and research**
   A. AOOS programs (Sheyna Wisdom)

*** Banquet at Hilton. Doors open at 6:30. Door prizes!!!! ***

Alaska Beluga Whale Committee
Thursday - Day 2

Meeting starts at 8:30 am

10. **Other beluga projects and research cont.**
    A. Wainwright TEK study (Helen Cold, Daniel Gonzales)
    B. WWF funding opportunities (Kyle Newman, WWF)
    C. North Slope Borough beluga projects – genetics, tagging, harvest monitoring, aging (John Citta)
11. **Beluga Management**
    A. Co-Management meetings with NMFS: Nov 2023, upcoming (Tom Gray, Robert Suydam, John Citta)
    B. Eastern Bering Sea—update from workshop
    C. Kotzebue Sound belugas
        i. Kotzebue Sound meetings August 2024 (John Bengtson and/or Barb Mahoney)
        ii. Designating Kotzebue Sound as a separate stock: update (John Bengtson)
        iii. Next steps
12. **Bylaws and attendance policy**
    A. Proposed changes to bylaws (Kathy Frost)
13. **Elections (time for normal reelection and/or rotation)**
    A. Election for Chairman (now Tom Gray)
    B. Election for Secretary (now Kathy Frost)
14. **Research Questions for 2024** (Tom Gray, John Citta, Robert Suydam)
    A. What projects are high priority for 2024?
    B. We need to submit a proposal for next 3 years
        i. Sampling program for EBS
        ii. Advanced genetics techniques to further assess stock structure in Alaska
        iii. Aerial survey for Bristol Bay
15. **Youth reports** (young hunters tell what they thought of the meeting)
16. **Thank you to NSB** - funding for banquet and other things they do
17. **Any other items**
18. **Next meeting dates**



Alaska Beluga Whale Committee

ABWC Officers since 1988

The Officers of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee are Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary and two Members-at-Large. These officers constitute the Executive Committee. Each officer serves for a two-year term and may be re-elected for consecutive terms. The Chairman and Secretary are elected the same year, and the remaining officers in the alternate year to ensure continuity.

Chairman:

1988 – 1995 Walter Sampson, Kotzebue

1995 – 2005 Ross Schaeffer, Kotzebue

2005 - 2017 Willie Goodwin, Kotzebue

2017 – present **Tom Gray, Nome**

Vice Chairman

1988-1995 Jakie Koonuk, Point Hope

1995-2003 Marie Adams Carroll, North Slope Borough Mayor's Office

2003-2014 Harry Brower, North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management

2014-2017 Tom Gray, Council/Nome

2017-2021 Albert Simon, Hooper Bay

2021-2023 Marvin Okitkun, Kotlik

2023-Present Leonard Barger, Point Hope

Secretary:

1988-present Kathy Frost)

Officers-at-Large (two)

2018-2021 Jerry Ivanoff, Unalakleet

2018-2021 Marvin Okitkun, Kotlik

2021 – present **Cyrus Harris, Kotzebue**

2021 – present **Billy Adams, Utqiaġvik**

The ABWC bylaws were changed in 2018 to replace Treasurer and Sergeant-at-Arms with two Officers-at-Large. Below are the persons who previously held the offices of Treasurer and Sergeant-at-Arms.

Treasurer:

1988-1990 Geoff Carroll, North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management

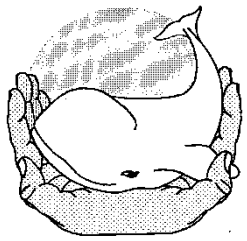
1991-1995 Marie Adams Carroll, North Slope Borough

1995-2018 Molly Chythlook, Dillingham

Sergeant-at-Arms

1988-1996 Nathan Hadley, Sr., Buckland (deceased 2022)

1996-2018 Charles Saccheus, Sr., Elim



Alaska Beluga Whale Committee
2024 ABWC Delegates

North Slope
Barrow (Joe Leavitt)
Point Hope (Leonard Barger, Vice Chairman)
Point Lay (Robert Lisbourne)
Wainwright (Raymond Aguvluk)

Kotzebue Sound
Buckland (Raymond Lee, Jr.)
Deering (Beverly Moto)
Kivalina (Jerry Norton, Jr.)
Kotzebue (Cyrus Harris, Officer-at-Large)
Noatak (Thurston Booth)

Norton Sound
Brevig Mission (none)
Elim (Morris Nakarak, Sr.)
Golovin (none)
Koyuk (Archie Ervin)
Nome (Tom Gray, Chairman)
Saint Michael (Joe Akaran)
Shaktoolik (Raymond Hunt)
Stebbins (Jared Raymond)
Unalakleet (Frank Katchatag; Jason Haugen, young hunter)

Yukon Delta
Alakanuk (Ken Lee)
Emmonak (Brandon Kameroff)
Hooper Bay (Andre Simon)
Kotlik (John Tonuchuk)
Mountain Village (Kevin Thompson)
Nunam Iqua (Edwards Adams, Sr.)
Pilot Station (Rex Nick)
Pitka's Point (none)
Saint Mary's (none)
Scammon Bay (Isaac Rivers)

Kuskokwim
AVCP (Jennifer Hooper)
Quinhagak (Eddie Teeluk)
Platinum (Frank James)
Toksook Bay (no delegate 2024)

Bristol Bay
Aleknagik (no delegate 2024)
Dillingham (Jesse Rogers)
Manokotak (Andrewski Toyukak)
BBNA (Jorjana Dray)

North Slope Borough
Billy Adams, Officer-at-Large
John Citta

National Marine Fisheries Service
Alaska Region (Anne Marie Eich)
Alaska Region (Barbara Mahoney)
Marine Mammal Lab (Robyn Angliss)
Marine Mammal Lab (John Bengtson)

Alaska Department Fish & Game
Lori Quakenbush

Charter and other Members
John Burns
Kathy Frost, Secretary
Robert Suydam
Greg O'Corry-Crowe
Marvin Okitkun, Member-at-Large

ABWC Travel Info & Policies

Meeting Hotel and where you will stay: **Anchorage Hilton**

Check-in: Go to front desk, tell them you are with Alaska Beluga Whale Committee and your name.

Your hotel room will be paid for by a purchase order from the North Slope Borough. The Hilton may request a credit card from you in case you charge any extras. Only the room is covered by the ABWC.

IF you signed your TA and sent it back, you will get your **per diem check** the first day to the meeting. If you need to get to a bank to cash your check, please contact a North Slope Borough representative.

Travel rules:

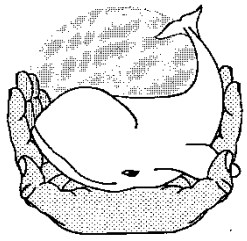
1) **If you cannot get out of your village or return home after the meeting due to flight delays or cancellations caused by weather**, **contact Penney Kennedy (907-319-7594) and she will make changes to your ticket and arrange lodging.** ABWC will cover your change ticket fees and hotel expenses, but only if your flight is cancelled. ABWC will not cover expenses for extra personal days. You must fly home on the next available flight.
2) **If you change your ticket for personal reasons, the ABWC will not cover any differences in fare, change fees, lodging, per diem, or other expenses.** You must call your local airline (e.g., Grant Aviation or Wrights Air) and Alaska Air to make ticket changes yourself. Do not call Penney Kennedy if making ticket changes for personal reasons.
3) If you have travel problems, call Penney Kennedy (907-319-7594), if Penney is unavailable, call John Citta at 907-699-3224.

Attendance & Sobriety policy:

1) You must come to all days of the meeting sober. The ABWC has a written policy about this. If you do not, you will be asked to leave. Your Tribal Council will be notified and asked to return your travel expenses. You will not be able to attend future meetings.
2) Delegates are required to be at the meetings and should be there on time. It is expensive to bring delegates into town and we have a lot of business to do. You should not make doctor appointments or other arrangements during meeting times. You should schedule those at another time, such as after the ABWC meeting (see #2, changing your ticket for personal reasons, above).

REMINDER

It is the responsibility of every delegate to report back to their Tribal Council about the meeting. You may arrange a meeting with them to make a report, give them your meeting packet, or do it another way. You might consider talking at the school. Reporting back is especially important when the ABWC is working on beluga plans that will affect every hunter's life.



Alaska Beluga Whale Committee

c/o NSB Dept Wildlife Management

P.O. Box 69
Barrow, AK 99721
Phone (Tom Gray cell) (907) 304-2003

DRAFT Minutes

6-7 December 2023 - Anchorage, Alaska

People attending the meeting were:

Billy Adams	NSB Wildlife, Box 69, Barrow, AK 99723	885-8387 cell billy.adams@north-slope.org
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Quincy Adams	Box 1693, Barrow, AK 99723	538-1284 quincy.adams@north-slope.org
Joe Akaran	Box 59023, St. Michael, AK 997	933-1110 rockskipper95@gmail.com
Robyn Angliss	NOAA/MML, Seattle, WA 98115	(206) 778-5664 robyn.angliss@noaa.gov
Leonard Barger	Box 152, Point Hope, AK 99766	368-1379 labarger2020@gmail.com
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David C. Brown	Box 62112, Golovin, AK 99762	739-1072 davidcb09@outlook.com
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John Burns Sr.	PO Box 83570, Fairbanks, AK 99709	474-2671 jburnssr@gci.net
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Tom Gray	Box 306, Nome, AK 99762	304-2003 tom@akadventure.com
Cyrus Harris	Box 755, Kotzebue, AK 99752	412-1344 350-7835 cell charris@maniilaq.org
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Norman John	Box 37061, Toksook Bay, AK 99637	427-2505 normanjohn_04@yahoo.com
Brandon Kameroff	Box 83, Emmonak, AK 99581	949-6641 brandonkameroff@gmail.com
Ken Lee	Box 122, Alakanuk, AK 99554	238-2103 alaskangrown35@gmail.com
Raymond Lee Jr.	Box 12, Buckland, AK	494-5303
Barbara Mahoney	NMFS, 222 West 7th Ave, Anchorage, AK 99513	331-8528 cell barbara.mahoney@noaa.gov
Sue Moore	US Marine Mammal Commission	(206) 482-8031 moore4@uw.edu
Beverly Moto	Box 73, Deering, AK 99736	363-5020 cell beverlymoto@yahoo.com
Morris Nakarak	Box 39061, Elim, AK 99739	880-5109 mnakarak2018@gmail.com
Rex Nick	Box 5087, Pilot Station, AK 99650	549-2480 rexjnick@hotmail.com
Jerry Norton Jr.	Box 46, Kivalina, AK 99750	jerryfrankbc@yahoo.com
Greg O'Corry-Crowe	Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution, FL 34946	(772) 766-5793 gocorryc@fau.edu
Cylas Okitkun	DID NOT SHOW UP	
Marvin Okitkun	Box 20142, Kotlik, AK 99620	899-2233 marvinokitkun@yahoo.com
Edward Prunes	Box 93, Scammon Bay, AK 99662	545-7974 prunesedward0@gmail.com
Lori Quakenbush	ADF&G, 1300 College Rd, Fairbanks, AK 99701	978-2760 lori.quakenbush@alaska.gov
Wybon Rivers	Box 44, Scammon Bay, AK 99662	536-2073 ybunn_ar_2019@yahoo.com
Jesse Rogers	Box 754, Dillingham, AK 99576	843-0497 jcrogers1993@hotmail.com
Elmer Seetot III	Box 85039, Brevig Mission, AK 99785	643-0024 eseetot@hotmail.com
Albert Simon	Box 91, Hooper Bay, AK 99604	758-2355 cell albertsimon380@gmail.com
Robert Suydam	4778 Mille Dr., Anchorage, AK 99508	(559) 313-4652 cell rssuydam@gmail.com
Tyler Takak	Box 68, Shaktoolik, AK 99771	956-1039 takaktyler@gmail.com
Eddie Teeluk	Box 63, Quinhagak, AK 99655	556-2065 eteeluk.coq@gmail.com
Benjamin Tinker	Box 61, Aleknagek, AK 99555	843-1508 bennytinker@icloud.com
John Tonuchuk	Box 20153, Kotlik, AK 99620	899-2078 johntonuchuk@gmail.com
Paul Wade	NOAA AFSC, Seattle, WA	paul.wade@noaa.gov

Visitors

Wilfred R. Abby	Noatak, AK 99761	485-5135
Amelia Adams	Box 9, Nunam Iqua, AK 99666	
Quincy Adams	Box 1693, Barrow, AK 99723	538-1284 quincy.adams@north-slope.org
Hilda Booth	Box 24, Noatak, AK 99761	485-5166 amagugaaq23@gmail.com
Vicki Cornish	Marine Mammal Commission	(703) 862-9948 vcornish@mmc.gov
Danielle Dickson	North Pacific Research Board, Anchorage, AK	223-2032 danielle.dickson@nprb.org
Bonnie Easley-Appleyard	NMFS Alaska Region, Anchorage, AK 99513	271-5172 bonnie.easley-appleyard@noaa.gov
Penny Kennedy	North Slope Borough	
Madison Kosma	1560 SW Ocean Ct., Waldport, Oregon 97394	madison.kosma@gmail.com
Elisabeth Kruger	810 N St. Ste 300, Anchorage, AK 99501	717-7714 elisabeth.kruger@wwfus.org
Mike Miller	IPCoMM	739-9345 mike@ipcommalaska.com
Alena Naiden	Anchorage Daily News	(206) 419-0398 anaiden@adn.com
Kyle Newman	WWFUS, 801 N. ST. Ste 300, Anchorage. AK 99501	kyle.newman@wwfus.org
Kayla Scheimreif	Box 137, Barrow, AK 99723	855-1181 kayla.scheimreif@north-slope.org
Jackie Shaff	US Marine Mammal Commission	(425) 478-7523 jshaff@mmc.gov
Mary Weinard	Box 36073, Deering, AK 99736	363-5020
Amilee Wilson	National Marine Fisheries Service	723-7099 amilee.wilson@noaa.gov

Wednesday, 9 December 2023

Tom Gray, ABWC Chairman, called the meeting to order at 8:44 am. Frank James from Platinum gave the invocation. Introductions were made. Tom asked people who had butchered whales stand up, followed by the biologists, to demonstrate how ABWC members are interdependent. John Citta reviewed travel and attendance policies. Delegates must come to the meeting sober and attend all meeting sessions. The 2023 meeting agenda and the 2022 meeting minutes were approved unanimously.

Tom gave a brief update on the Eastern Bering Sea (EBS) workshop held the day before. He reported that workshop participants concluded more hunter education is needed before moving forward with the EBS management plan. Tyler Takak asked why a meeting was held in Elim but not Shaktoolik. Tom said that a meeting was scheduled in Shaktoolik but travel issues prevented it. Tom talked about how important it is to get to the villages for outreach.

FUNDING, PARTNER AND MEETING REPORTS

ABWC Funding Report – John Citta reported the ABWC currently has three open NOAA grants: 2020: $235,330; expires January 2025; about $57,000 remains. John recommends the remaining funds be spent for 2024 EBS aerial surveys. 2021: $204,500; expires January 2025; about $48,000 remaining. John recommends the remaining funds be spent for 2024 EBS aerial surveys. 2021: $807,561; expires July 2025; balance remaining about $427,000. We are doing well on spending for meetings, but are lagging on spending for science projects. Some of the remaining funds will be used for 2024 EBS aerial surveys.

Tom said funding is needed for staff to assist Kathy. John replied that funds to be used for staff must be approved by NMFS. Instead, he suggested applying for a new grant to fund staff. Kathy could use help posting updates on the ABWC Facebook page. John Citta said the NSB is in the process of updating the ABWC website, and that Kayla can assist with updating the Facebook page. Leonard Barger was concerned about posting photos of whaling on Facebook and Kathy replied that the Hunters/Biologists Facebook Page is a private group that cannot be viewed by the public.

NMFS Alaska Region Report – Barbara Mahoney provided the NMFS Alaska Region Report. Barb reported that ABWC will receive the final year of funding under its ongoing 3-year grant. Anne-Marie Eich has taken over Jon Kurland's role as Regional Manager. She was unable to attend the meeting today, but will be at the co-management meeting on Friday. Recently NOAA headquarters staff (Kim Randall, Terry Rowles, and John Bengtson) went to Nome, Savoonga, and Utqiaġvik with staff from the Alaska Regional Office. They met with Tom Gray, the Ice Seal Committee, and Kawerak. The NOAA headquarters staff described the trip as eye-opening. They were glad to hear Tom's thoughts on beluga co-management.

NMFS Marine Mammal Lab (MML) Report – Robyn Angliss said that John Bengtson will attend the Executive Committee meeting on Friday. The Bristol Bay beluga stock assessment report (SAR) has been updated, and a draft is available to the ABWC. The Chukchi Sea stock assessment report (SAR) is also available. MML presented an

update on the 2022 Eastern Bering Sea (EBS) aerial survey estimate at the EBS workshop on Tuesday. Robyn emphasized that although the new estimate is higher than the 2017 estimate, there is more uncertainty and we cannot say that the population has increased. MML will report on the status of the Kotzebue Sound beluga stock review at the co-management meeting on Friday.

Marine Mammal Commission - Sue Moore is a new commissioner on the Marine Mammal Commission (MMC). She was a member of the MMC Committee of Scientific Advisors for the previous 17 years. Sue has worked in Alaska since 1981 studying the ecology of whales in the eastern Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. The other MMC commissioners are Andy Reed and the Chair Frances Gulland. The MMC awards small grants focusing on marine mammals. Sue encouraged the ABWC to apply. Sue said that as a commissioner she will keep the ABWC updated on impacts to marine mammals. She believes it is valuable for agency staff to visit communities.

Kathy Frost and others thanked Sue for coming to the meeting and encouraged continued communication with ABWC. Tom Gray explained that the MMC was formed to advise the President on marine mammal issues. He said the ABWC is lucky to have "one of our own" with access to policy decisions at the Washington DC level. Billy Adams said it is fortunate to have a MMC commissioner with experience in the north. It is important to have people who create relationships and build bridges between scientists and the communities. Robert Suydam said that the ABWC's connection with the Commissioners gives the ABWC a greater voice. He added that the MMC is requesting proposals about marine mammals in a changing environment and for projects that encourage training and participation in marine mammal science in underrepresented communities. This could be a way to engage young hunters within the ABWC. The Alaska Eskimo Walrus Commission has a youth group which might be a model for the ABWC.

Inuvialuit-Inupiat (I-I) Beluga Whale Commission Meeting Update – John Citta reported on the 2023 I-I meeting. ABWC members attending the meeting were John, Billy Adams, Leonard Barger and Anna Bryan. The I-I agreement is for the Beaufort Sea stock, but the I-I committee occasionally discusses other stocks. In 2023, resolutions were passed: 1) to support responsible and non-invasive drone work in Canada and Alaska (the Canadians are trying to estimate body condition of belugas with drones); and 2) to have more information exchange between Canada and Alaska. The Canadians would like sample collection to be more consistent between the two countries. The I-I will send a hunter and a Canadian researcher to Point Lay for the 2024 beluga harvest. They hope a Point Lay hunter and an Alaskan scientist can go to Tuktoyaktuk in the following year.

Billy Adams reported that there is still no explanation for the high mortality of belugas tagged in the Mackenzie in 2019. John Citta said that the 2019 mortality report should be done by the next I-I meeting. Canadian scientists and hunters are working together to develop different tagging methods.

Tom Gray asked about the abundance estimate for the Beaufort Sea stock. John Citta said the estimate of 20,000-40,000 Beaufort Sea belugas is very old. Results of the more recent 2019 beluga surveys are still not available, however Canadian scientist Lisa Loseto says the new estimate will be at least as big as the previous one. Robert Suydam said the estimate will be greater than 40,000 and the surveys covered only part of the area where Beaufort Sea belugas occur. Tom stressed that it is exciting that both Beaufort Sea and EBS beluga populations are stable.

Indigenous People's Commission for Marine Mammals (IPCoMM) Report - Mike Miller, Chairman of IPCoMM, reported on IPCoMM activities. IPCoMM consists of 16 co-management group members. The language common to all 16 groups is the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), although changes to the MMPA may affect groups differently. IPCoMM is working to help Alaska Native Organizations (ANOs) make progress as a group. Capacity in an issue for all ANOs. Only a few people hold each group together and carry the load. The groups are strong but fragile to the loss of people. It is difficult to recruit more people without sufficient funding. IPCoMM representatives traveled to Washington DC in June to talk with the Appropriations Committee and request additional and less restricted funding for core support of member ANOs. Language has been drafted that would allow each ANO to decide how to spend its funds. Funding levels have remained the same for years. No additional funding was received for 2024, but IPCoMM has requested funding for FY2025. Mike added that Congress prefers ANOs to ask for funding as a group, not individually. Mike emphasized the importance of hunter representation.

Why Belugas are Vulnerable to Harvest - John Burns explained that the basic biology of belugas makes them vulnerable to harvest and difficult to manage. Belugas mature at 8-11 years, have a calf every 2-3-years, and are pregnant for 14 months. Because of the long gestation of belugas, both newly pregnant and term pregnant females are harvested during drive hunts. If a drive hunt occurs in June, two thirds of the adult females could be pregnant. This can have a large effect on the population.

Albert Simon asked how what happened at Elephant Point could be avoided in the future. John replied that if a hunter can distinguish between males and females, he should avoid females, especially females with a newborn calf. Albert said there are lots of young hunters in Hooper Bay. He tells them to not hunt females and calves, to leave the gray whales alone and to harvest single white belugas. Tom Gray recommended that Lori Quakenbush incorporate this discussion into the student hunting guide. Kathy Frost suggested showing photos of harvested belugas at future meetings and explaining how to tell if they are males or females. Billy Adams emphasized the importance of what John Burns said about beluga reproduction. He thinks the ABWC needs to do more outreach with young hunters. Tom asked the hunters to write down what they would like to see for hunter education and turn this in at the end of the meeting.

REGIONAL HARVEST REPORTS

Beaufort Sea Stock

Barrow (Utqiaġvik) – Billy Adams reported 16 belugas were harvested at Barrow in summer 2023. No belugas were harvested in spring. Billy said there was no struck and lost.

Point Hope - Leonard Barger reported 30+ belugas were harvested in spring and 2 belugas in summer 2023. At least 1 whale was struck and lost. Struck and lost occurs, but numbers are not usually reported. Point Hope hunters always try to recover lost whales. Leonard said belugas were still present near Point Hope in late November and early December. He stressed the importance of teaching young hunters.

Kaktovik - Billy Adams reported that Kaktovik harvested 1 or 2 belugas in summer 2023.

Nuiqsut – Billy Adams reported no belugas harvested at Nuiqsut in 2023.

Diomede – The Diomede Tribal Council told Anna Bryan that Diomede harvested no belugas in 2023.

Eastern Chukchi Sea Stock

Wainwright – Billy Adams and Quincy Adams reported that about 16 belugas were harvested in Wainwright. Kathy said Raymond Aguvluk reported that 17 belugas were harvested in 2023. Raymond provided a written harvest report to Kathy.

Point Lay – No delegate was present from Point Lay. John Citta said that 11 belugas were harvested in June 2023.

Kotzebue Sound

Buckland –Raymond Lee reported that 1 male was harvested at the mouth of the river in summer 2023 with none struck and lost (15-20 were in the herd). The family that shot that beluga was young, and Raymond showed them how to butcher it. The blubber on that whale was not even an inch thick. In fall, some belugas went up to 28 miles upriver. Raymond said that these belugas were fast, much faster than he is used to seeing.

Deering – Beverly Moto reported that no belugas were harvested by Deering in 2023. Some dolphins and killer whales were seen. Raymond Lee heard that a harpoon was thrown at a whale but came out. He wasn't sure if that would be considered struck and lost. Tom said that he thought it was not struck and lost because the beluga should survive.

Kivalina – Jerry Norton Jr. reported 1 struck and lost beluga in the spring, and approximately 7 caught in nets in the summer. More nets are being used in Kivalina because it is easier.

Kotzebue & Noatak – Cyrus Harris reported that he didn't get samples this year and his harvest report is not exact because he was out of town. He knew that 4 belugas were harvested: 1 adult female, and 2 adults of unknown sex and 1 gray beluga. 1 white beluga was struck and lost. Most of the belugas were caught by net in July. At Kotzebue they are seeing more belugas in late summer and fall. Many were seen in October and at the beginning of ice-up. They were seen near Deering and Cape Espenberg in October.

Thurston Booth reported that Noatak netted 4 white belugas of unknown sex at Sisualik in the fall. None were shot or harpooned. He got samples from all four. They are starting to see belugas in late June and July again, after many years with almost none, but it is rougher now. He said he was taught not to harvest the females with calves.

Shishmaref – Elmer Seetot and Raymond Hunt reported that Shishmaref harvested no belugas in 2023.

Eastern Bering Sea Stock *– Norton Sound*

Brevig Mission – Elmer Seetot reported that 1 bull was landed in early October 2023 with none struck and lost. Two people set nets and only this one whale was caught by boat due to weather. Elmer thought about 12 were harvested in 2022. (Tom Gray reported at least 7 were harvested by boat in 2022.)

Elim – Morris Nakarak reported that Elim harvested 15 total belugas in 2023 (7 white, 8 gray; 10 by boat; 3 gray belugas were caught as bycatch from salmon fishing). Ice conditions were poor in the spring. Six were harvested in May (4 white, 2 gray; 5 by boat; 1 by net). Morris said that this is the first time he's seen someone set a net in the spring. In the fall, 5 belugas were harvested (3 white, 2; 3 by net). Morris said there was nothing unusual to report and there were no calves found dead on the beach. Tom thanked Morris for bringing in samples.

Golovin – David Brown reported that Golovin netted 1 gray beluga in late September 2023. People hunted in the spring but didn't catch any belugas. Tom said the spring hunt becoming more popular. No belugas were struck and lost.

Koyuk – There was no delegate from Koyuk. Raymond Hunt reported that Koyuk harvested 5 or 6 in spring and none in the fall of 2023.

Nome/Council – Tom Gray reported that 9 belugas were harvested at Nome in 2023 (4-5 white, 4 gray; 4 in nets, 5 shot). Tom had no information about struck and lost.

Saint Michael – Joe Akaran said St. Michael harvested 4-5 belugas in late summer 2023. One beluga washed up dead. They saw many belugas this year.

Shaktoolik – Raymond Hunt reported that Shaktoolik harvested 15 white belugas by boat in 2023 (14 males, 1 female; 8 spring, 1 summer, 6 fall). One beluga was struck and lost when the harpoon came out. Shaktoolik usually hunts in shallow water and they harpoon before they shoot. Raymond said they try to avoid females and young gray belugas. Shaktoolik and Elim are the first communities in Norton Sound to harvest belugas in spring, and then Koyuk. Raymond said that hunters from Shaktoolik and Elim cooperate to help Koyuk with their harvest. Raymond took a picture of one beluga with a full-size silver salmon and tomcod in its stomach.

Stebbins – Joe Akaran reported that about 15 belugas were harvested by Stebbins in 2023. Cyrus Okitkun, the Stebbins delegate, did not show up at the meeting.

Unalakleet – Jacob Ivanoff reported to Kathy Frost that Unalakleet netted 8 belugas in fall 2023 (1 white, 7 gray).

White Mountain – Tom Gray reported that White Mountain did not set nets and harvested no belugas in 2023.

Eastern Bering Sea Stock *– Yukon*

Alakanuk – Ken Lee reported that Alakanuk harvested 6 belugas in 2023 (1 in summer, 2 in September, 3 in October; 4 white, 2 gray; 3 males, 3unknown) with no struck and lost. There was no spring hunt.

Chevak – Albert Simon reported that Chevak harvested 4 belugas in 2023 (3 white, 1 gray).

Emmonak – Brandon Kameroff reported that 16 belugas were harvested by Emmonak in 2023 (14 white, 2 gray; 13 summer, 3 fall) with 1 struck and lost in October. All were harvested by boat in shallow water and harpooned before they were shot.

Hooper Bay – Albert Simon reported that 13 belugas were harvested by Hooper Bay in 2023 (11 spring, 2 fall; 6 white, 7 gray). All were harvested by boat. One beluga was struck and lost. Weather limited hunting in the fall.

Kotlik – John Tonuchuk reported that 17 belugas were harvested by Kotlik in 2023 with no struck and lost (16 white, 1 gray). None were harvested in spring, 2 in August (Marvin Okitkun), 1 in September and the rest later. No samples were collected. Eight boats caught belugas. It was a difficult year.

Marshall – Marvin Okitkun said he thinks Marshall harvested 2 belugas in 2023. About 30 went upriver above Marshall.

Mountain Village – Jennifer Hooper reported that Mountain Village harvested 7 belugas in summer 2023 (6 white, 1 gray; 5 males, 2 females) with 1 struck and lost. They were harvested by boats in shallow water near the middle mouth and were eating salmon.

Nunam Iqua – Edward Adams Sr. reported that Nunam Iqua harvested 5 belugas in 2023 (3 white, 2 gray) with no struck and lost. Hunters harpoon before they shoot. Nunam Iqua teaches young people to chase whales to shallow spots.

Pilot Station – Rex Nick reported that Pilot Station took 3 white belugas in summer 2023 with no struck and lost. This year a gray beluga came up the Yukon all the way to Pilot Station (110 miles).

Pitka's Point –Stephen Sergie reported to Kathy Frost that Pitka's Point harvested 1 white female by boat in fall 2023 with none struck and lost. This was the only beluga seen.

Russian Mission – Marvin Okitkun reported that Russian Mission harvested 2 white belugas in 2023. They went to the coast to hunt.

Saint. Mary's – Marvin Okitkun heard that St. Mary's harvested at least 2 belugas in 2023. One was a boy's first beluga.

Scammon Bay – Wybon Rivers reported that 28 belugas were harvested by Scammon Bay in 2023 with no information about struck and lost (16 white, 12 gray; 18 males, 10 females). All were harvested by boat in shallow water. Six (6) belugas harvested in spring (3 white, 3 gray), 12 in summer (7 white, 5 gray), and 10 in fall (6 white, 4 gray). Beluga stomachs contained smelt, salmon, tomcod, and lots of tape worms. No killer whales were seen this year.

Kuskokwim – Jennifer Hooper said she sent surveys out for the Kuskokwim communities and also reached out by phone. She received 7 surveys back. **Kipnuk** harvested 2 belugas in fall 2023. Eddie Teeluk and Jennifer Hooper reported that **Eek** harvested 1 beluga in 2023. Frank James said that **Platinum** and **Goodnews** harvested no belugas in 2023, although there are more sightings now. **Kwigillingok** harvested 1 white beluga by boat in shallow water in July. Napakiak does not hunt belugas.

Toksook Bay – Norman John reported that 12 belugas were harvested by Toksook Bay in 2023 (4 spring, 8 fall). The spring belugas (2 white, 2 gray) were harvested by boat in shallow water. Fall belugas (all white) were taken in both shallow and deep water. Cod and starry flounder were found in the stomachs.

Newtok – There was no information from Newtok in 2023.

Quinhagak – Eddie Teeluk reported that during two calm days in late October 2023, Quinhagak harvested 3 gray belugas and Eek harvested 1. More belugas were seen the week before the ABWC meeting but none were harvested. Now it is all frozen. Quinhagak hunters usually harvest belugas in late fall or early spring. Eddie saved skin samples from 3 belugas.

Bristol Bay Stock

The total known harvest for Bristol Bay in 2023 was 12 based on the report from Renee Roque of BBNA. There was no reported beluga harvest from the east Bristol Bay region in 2023. **Igiugig, Iliamna,** and **Naknek** harvested no belugas. There was no information for **Levelock** for 2023.

The west Bristol Bay region harvested 12 belugas in 2023. Jesse Rogers reported that **Dillingham** harvested 6 belugas in 2022 (2 white, 4 gray; 3 males, 3 females; 3 spring, 1 summer, 2 fall). This includes Twin Hills and two harvested by a hunter from Platinum in October. Ben Tinker reported that **Aleknagik** harvested no belugas in 2023 but Renee said 1 was reported. **Manokotak** harvested 4 belugas in 2023 (3 by boat, 1 by net; 3 white, 1 gray; 1 spring, 2 summer, 1 fall). **Nushagak** and **New Stuyahok** harvested 0 belugas in 2023. **Clarks Point** harvested 2 belugas in nets. There was no information about struck and lost.

Tom thanked everyone for their harvest reports. We need to collect more samples. They are easy to collect and to keep.

AERIAL SURVEYS

Eastern Bering Sea Aerial Surveys – Robyn Angliss provided an update on aerial surveys. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) conducted eastern Beaufort Sea beluga surveys in 2019 and expects to have a revised abundance estimate soon. The Marine Mammal Lab (MML) also collected data during bowhead whale surveys that could be used to estimate eastern Beaufort Sea beluga abundance. Those data have not yet been analyzed due to staffing issues. Robert Suydam asked if the data would be available for analysis if the ABWC obtained funding and Robyn expected it would be.

Paul Wade presented an update on 2024 Eastern Bering Sea (EBS) aerial surveys. Kim Sheldon will lead this survey. The survey window is 17 June-2 July, providing 16 available flight days and 40-60 survey hours depending on funding. MML will fly the same transect lines as in previous surveys, but with less coverage offshore (every third line) where few belugas are seen. Nearshore, every line will be flown at least once and twice if funding and weather allow. Tom explained that surveys provide abundance estimates so the ABWC can make sure harvests are at a safe level. The 2024 EBS survey is an extra survey requested by the ABWC because conditions were poor during the 2022 surveys. Tom noted that NMFS is a good partner in helping us to keep the harvest safe: we sometimes argue but we work together.

Raymond Hunt asked about the frequency and cost of surveys. Robyn said MML plans to survey the EBS every 5-7 years (next will be 2029) at a cost of about $300,000. NOAA and ABWC split aircraft and logistics costs, with NOAA providing salaries. Albert asked about the accuracy of abundance estimates. Paul explained that analysis methods take accuracy into account and adjust for better or worse conditions. The draft 2022 abundance estimate is less certain than the 2017 estimate when survey conditions were excellent. Paul explained that a confidence interval can be used to indicate accuracy. For example, we can say that we feel confident that the number is between 12,000 and 15,500.

Eastern Chukchi and Beaufort Sea Aerial Surveys –Robyn Angliss said that NOAA will collect beluga data in conjunction with bowhead whale surveys in 2025. These data will be used to provide abundance estimates for the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas stocks. There is some concern about survey timing. Robert said that beluga tagging has provided some information about distribution and timing. Robyn suggested doing the bowhead survey earlier than usual to collect beluga data and John Citta thought this would work.

ABWC PROJECTS

Beluga stomach analysis and diet projects –Lori Quakenbush introduced Anna Bryan who provided an update on the beluga samples collected by ADFG and how they are processed. Anna thanked hunters for collecting samples. ADFG collects beluga skin, stomachs and jaws. In the future they hope hunters will save kidneys to investigate kidney worms. Jaws are collected for aging. Skin samples are sent to Greg O'Corry-Crowe for genetics analysis. ADFG has received 27 skin samples so far in 2023. Anna requested that hunters freeze DMSO bottles with skin samples to preserve the quality of samples.

Stomach contents are analyzed to understand diet changes over time. In 2023, stomach samples were received from Utqiaġvik, Point Lay, Kotzebue, Nome and Scammon Bay. Anna described how stomachs are analyzed. Things like squid and octopus beaks and fish ear bones (otoliths) are used to identify prey types. Diet varied by region: at Utqiaġvik, belugas ate squid, octopus, shrimp and worms; at Point Lat squid, octopus, worms and shrimp; at Nome saffron cod, sand lance, smelt and flounder; and at Scammon Bay tomcod, smelt, and capelin. In the future, ADFG will use DNA to identify unrecognizable stomach contents.

Anna handed out sample kits to every delegate at the meeting. They included sample bottles, a marker and a data sheet.

Student beluga hunting guide – Lori Quakenbush provided an update on the Beluga Student Guidebook that ADFG is developing with funding from ABWC and the NSB. The project began in 2019 and is based on a seal hunting guide for the AVCP region. It is geared for grades 4-6. The draft has been updated based on feedback from hunters and will be completed before the next ABWC meeting.

Tom asked Lori why there has been so little population growth of Cook Inlet belugas even though there have been few strandings. Lori suggested that NMFS provide a talk dedicated to this at some point. John Burns responded that Cook Inlet belugas are restricted to the worst habitat due to turbidity and limited visibility – the upper end of Cook Inlet. John said that you can't see eight inches with a Secchi disk in that area. The annual loss is significant – higher than calf production. Kathy said that once a stock gets down to 300-500 individuals, it seems that they never recover. Millions and millions of dollars have been spent in Cook Inlet for 30 years and no progress has been made. She said that the stories at Svalbard and St. Lawrence Estuary are similar. John Burns added that the Kuskokwim Bay population also never rebounded, and that someone should look into this. Tom noted that it should be verified if this is or is not a separate stock. Greg commented that there has been lots of research on population rebound and collapse on many different species. We know that at Ungava Bay, the population collapsed and never came back. Now we have retrospective tools that can help us understand why rebound doesn't occur for some species. Greg brought up the example of the Passenger Pigeon, which was not overhunted. Rather, it was the stress caused by hunters in breeding habitat that caused females to not breed for several years.

OTHER BELUGA PROJECTS AND RESEARCH

Recent genetics sample analysis – Greg O'Corry-Crowe summarized what we know about belugas from the Eastern Chukchi Sea and Kotzebue Sound. Kotzebue Sound samples collected in the early 1980s were not the same as Eastern Chukchi Sea (Point Lay) belugas. Now Kotzebue Sound beluga genetics are more dynamic, with genetic evidence of other stocks. Some of this is due to events in 1996 and 2007 when ice conditions were unusual and Beaufort Sea belugas came into Kotzebue Sound. Very few samples have been collected recently and it is difficult to resolve which stocks are present. Although genetic lineages from other stocks are present in Kotzebue Sound, there are also unusual markers found nowhere else. One of four samples collected in Kotzebue Sound in 2022 had a new haplotype

never seen before. Two haplotypes (one historical, one contemporary) have been found only in Kotzebue Sound. Another has only been seen once before (in the Yukon). Good quality samples are needed that can be analyzed for nuclear DNA and will provide more insight into stock structure. Greg thinks the next step is to examine the entire genome, not just small segments.

The most recent 2022 samples from belugas harvested at Point Hope in summer were very different from the older samples harvested there in spring. Summer 2022 Point Hope belugas were more similar to Eastern Chukchi Sea (Point Lay) belugas, whereas those sampled in April-May 1977-2007 were similar to Eastern Beaufort Sea (Mackenzie Delta) belugas. Robert suggested that recent April-May belugas at Point Hope could be early migrants from the ECS stock. Climate is changing ice conditions and the movements and distribution of belugas. If belugas showing up at Point Hope in August turn out to be Beaufort Sea belugas, this would be consistent with Beaufort Sea belugas showing up Kotzebue Sound at the same time. The 2023 Point Lay and Utqiaġvik samples haven't been analyzed yet. In the future, Greg said we need to collect more samples suitable for nuclear DNA analysis and to continue working on methods to get nuclear DNA from old samples.

Yukon River hydrophone acoustics study – Marvin Okitkun and Brandon Kameroff reported on the Yukon River acoustics study. They worked with Manuel Castellote from NMFS. Echolocation loggers were deployed at two sites in June 21st, one right above Emmonak where the whales are when they are chasing salmon. They listened for sounds that belugas make when they are navigating and searching for food. The river water is muddy, so echolocation is needed. At Aproke Island, beluga presence was higher earlier in the season, and no belugas were detected after the middle of August. At Seagull Point area, belugas were present the entire time, but there were more detections in August. The instruments were still detecting belugas when they were pulled out in early September. Elizabeth Kruger talked about her involvement with the project as well.

This project was a spontaneous idea from the Yukon beluga hunters at the 2022 ABWC meeting. It was in response to increased sightings of belugas moving farther up the Yukon River in summer. Elizabeth Kruger from World Wildlife Fund (WWF) said WWF had some research funds available and requested proposal ideas from the ABWC. The ABWC, Manuel Castellote and Yukon area hunters put a proposal together and it was funded by WWF. The goal of the project was to determine whether an acoustics project like this was feasible and would produce useful information. The answer to both was yes.

Historical beluga commercial harvests – John Burns summarized the historical commercial use of belugas in Alaska. Whale oil was an important commodity. John talked about the connection between Yankee whaling and the search for oil. Commercial whaling was the first oil rush. John described beluga whales as collateral damage of bowhead whaling. Beluga whale oil was as valuable as any other whale oil. Every stock in North America was exploited by commercial whalers. Some stocks recovered and some did not. In Norton Sound, St. Michael was an access point for fur trading. and beluga oil was the primary payment for fur. Many stocks were decimated and distribution changed radically.

Thursday 10 December

Tom Gray called the meeting to order at 08:45. Tom and Kathy Frost reminded everyone that the ABWC has a sobriety policy. Delegates have a responsibility to their communities, the ABWC and to belugas to attend all sessions of the meeting in a sober state. John Citta said it is hard to find a meeting venue and it is important to maintain good relations with the meeting hotel. If delegates do not attend the meetings or are not sober, the ABWC will contact their IRA office and they cannot attend future ABWC meetings.

Leonard Barger talked about the medicinal use of belugas. Beluga oil can be used to help ear infections. The oils from the head are used and must be cured for 3-4 months before use. Leonard hoped others would record information about the medicinal use of belugas in their villages. Tom reiterated that the Native world is changing rapidly and it is important to document the historical use of belugas. This could be an ABWC project.

OTHER BELUGA PROJECTS AND RESEARCH cont.

Beluga markings atlas – Lori Quakenbush reported about a project in Cook Inlet to document scars, lesions and other injury-related markings seen on belugas. Photographs of belugas with these markings will be included in an atlas or catalog. They can be compared to photographs of belugas from other stocks to see if they provide clues about why Cook Inlet belugas are not recovering.

North Slope Borough beluga projects – John Citta summarized NSB beluga projects. The NSB monitors the beluga harvest at Point Lay. In 2024, harvest monitoring will expand to included Point Hope and Wainwright. NSB studies will use samples from Point Hope, Point Lay and Wainwright to verify stock structure; investigate whether belugas can be aged using skin or other tissues (teeth and eyeballs), whether a CT scanner can be used for aging and whether counting tooth rings can be automated; and estimate age of maturation and calving rates using beluga teeth. Aging studies are also being done by Cook Inlet researchers. In 2024, the Canadians will come to Point Lay to observe harvest monitoring.

The NSB is searching for an alternative to aerial surveys for estimating beluga abundance. It is trying to determine whether genetics can be used to estimate abundance of eastern Chukchi Sea belugas. Existing estimates based on surveys have a very wide range, possibly due to the presence of Beaufort Sea belugas. The NSB is trying a method called "Close-Kin Mark-Recapture" which uses DNA from harvested belugas to build a family tree of related belugas to see how closely related they are. It's possible that samples from more than just harvested belugas could be obtained by collecting molted skin at Omalik Lagoon.

They NSB is cooperating with graduate student Madison Kosma to see if the body condition of belugas can be determined using photographs taken by drones at Point Hope.

Beluga drone studies in Cook Inlet – Paul Wade described a drone study by MML in Cook Inlet to estimate abundance and examine body condition. MML has conducted about 400 drone flights in CI. The drones carry a camera to photograph belugas. The photos can be used to identify individual belugas from their scars. A method called "Mark-Recapture" can be used to estimate the total number of belugas based on the number of re-sightings of the same whales. So far, 156 individual belugas have been identified: 46 have been seen twice and 11 have been seen three times. This method is producing quite good estimates of abundance. However, it is a good method for a small population but not for a large population. Paul said this field is changing very fast and AI may greatly improve it.

Photographs were also used to classify the ages of belugas and from this, the percentage of calves that were in the population (the reproduction rate). They measured the distance from the blowhole to the start of the dorsal ridge to put the belugas in categories. About 8.5% of the belugas measured were newborn calves and about 30% of the adult females would have had calves. Robert Suydam pointed out it can be very difficult to distinguish between newborn calves and yearlings. Tom Gray was pleased to see useful results coming out of Cook Inlet since so much money has been spent on this small population.

North Pacific Research Board Eastern Bering Sea research plan - Danielle Dickson gave a presentation about the upcoming Northern Bering Sea Integrated Ecosystem Research Program (IERP) in which 50-100 researchers will collaborate over 5 years. It will be a multi-disciplinary study to better understand ecosystem connections and the bigger ecosystem picture. The $65 million program will include a field work phase followed by a synthesis component.

The ABWC can submit research ideas to NPRB. Robert Suydam asked if successful proposal writers will be made public, so that ABWC can reach out to them rather than waiting for the researchers to make contact first. Danielle said there is a form on NPRB's website for those interested in working with the IERP. NPRB will publish contact details on their website for those who have been invited to submit full proposals.

Billy Adams commented that presentations like this are complicated for people in the communities. There is a lot of change going on in the environment now. Studies should address the health of the animals that Native people depend on. Tom Gray commended NPRB for including a synthesis component. Tom asked what drives NPRB research and Danielle replied that it has been the rapid rate of change in the Northern Bering Sea. The NPRB Board of 20 is diverse and includes government, industry, NGOs and Alaska Native people.

BELUGA MANAGEMENT

Co-management meetings with NMFS– Robert Suydam explained that NMFS and the ABWC Executive Committee and science team have been meeting twice a year, once after the ABWC meeting and once in May. The May 2023 minutes are in this year's meeting packet. The group will meet again on Friday after this meeting.

Kotzebue Sound belugas - Kathy Frost provided background information on the status of belugas in Kotzebue Sound. The beluga population there declined greatly in the early 1980s and has not increased since. In 2014, Buckland started the Buckland Beluga Project to address this issue and in 2016 Noatak also conducted a beluga study. Between 2017-2020, the ABWC worked with elders from Buckland, Deering, Kivalina, Kotzebue and Noatak to develop a Tribal

Kotzebue Sound Beluga Plan. This plan encourages hunters to avoid harvesting females with young, to avoid harvesting during June and July when Kotzebue belugas were historically present, and to focus their harvest on large groups of over 100 later in the summer. The Tribal Councils of all 5 villages signed the plan; however the highest harvest in 10 years occurred in 2021 and 2022. Few genetics samples have been collected from belugas harvested in Kotzebue Sound in recent years. Genetics information from samples could help to clarify what is going on with Kotzebue Sound belugas. Currently, Kotzebue Sound belugas are not classified as a separate stock even though genetics information collected in the 1980s indicates they are different than all other Alaska belugas.

The ABWC formally recommended to NOAA at its November 2022 meeting that Kotzebue Sound belugas be classified as a separate stock. Robyn Angliss explained this must be done through a formal government process in which NMFS first summarizes the existing information and determines there is a demographically independent population (DIP). Existing information includes both Indigenous Knowledge and scientific information. Once it is established that a DIP occurred, the next steps can be taken to designate Kotzebue belugas as a separate stock. Robyn provided a partial draft of the DIP report to the ABWC at this meeting and has requested feedback. The primary evidence for a DIP is based on genetics analysis and Indigenous Knowledge. The ABWC will draft a letter to NMFS in the near future with comments on the DIP summary.

Cyrus Harris pointed out that five communities harvest Kotzebue Sound belugas: Buckland, Deering, Kivalina, Kotzebue and Noatak. Cyrus said that he has been seeing more belugas in late summer and fall than he had in the past. When he was growing up, they used to watch belugas come towards Kotzebue on the incoming tide, but now the first belugas sighted are seen heading out of Kotzebue.

Billy Adams said he feels bad for the communities that used to rely on belugas. Tom responded that hunters know there used to be more whales in Kotzebue Sound and too many were hunted. Kathy reminded everyone that the elders from Kotzebue were the ones who came up with the plan, not the government. ABWC scientists were invited by the Kotzebue Sound elders to help solve the problem. Cyrus said that elders already knew that visiting belugas were coming into Kotzebue Sound. He doesn't think there is as much hunting pressure on belugas as comments have made it seem. He added that hunters know to switch to other food sources such as caribou. Raymond Lee said that he used to go to Elephant Point, and many people used to camp there. Since the late '80s, very few belugas have come into the bay and in some years none were seen. One beluga was harvested this year but he didn't get a sample.

SAR update: Eastern Chukchi and Bristol Bay - Robyn Angliss provided an update on the Stock Assessment Reports (SARs). The Eastern Chukchi Sea SAR revision has not moved forward since last year. There are questions about the abundance estimate and whether it could include Beaufort Sea belugas.

The Bristol Bay SAR has been revised. NMFS has had concerns about the correction factor used in the abundance estimate. They have reviewed the literature and decided the ADFG report for the 2022 survey will be accepted. The previous SAR abundance estimate was 2,140, while the new draft SAR estimate is 1,669. The new draft uses 4.8 as the maximum rate of reproduction, per the ABWC's recommendation and published information. The draft SAR will be provided to the ABWC for review. John Citta thanked Robyn for presenting the draft SAR. Robyn emphasized how important genetic samples are for understanding stock structure.

Eastern Bering Sea belugas – management plan, winter meetings - Lori Quakenbush and Tom Gray visited communities to provide information about belugas and the Eastern Bering Sea (EBS) beluga management plan. In Norton Sound, meetings were held in Nome, Unalakleet, Saint Michael and Elim. Only the Elim meeting was well attended. Yukon meetings were canceled due to bad weather and volcanic ash.

Tom Gray said that participants in Tuesday's Eastern Bering Sea workshop agreed that the ABWC's emphasis should be on hunter education about belugas and belugas stocks rather than on the management plan. Albert Simon noted that "We already have a management plan from our ancestors. We need to pass it on and educate our kids, but sometimes our kids don't understand." Tom expressed how important it is for Native people to manage our own resources. However, two out of six stocks in Alaska have been overharvested. We need to do better than that in the future. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to manage belugas ourselves.

Frank James asked if the Kuskokwim Bay area would be included in EBS beluga surveys. Kathy replied that aerial surveys aren't the best way to study stock structure, and that genetic samples are the first step. Tyler Takak said that he has harvested lots of different whales and that they all have different characteristics. He said that he understood this to mean that those whales belong to different stocks. Kathy clarified that individual whales may look different but this does not mean that they belong to separate stocks; for example, one person may be short and the other tall, but they can still

belong to the same family. Greg added to this, saying that both science and TK are always evolving. Eddie Teeluk said that he has caught whales in Quinhagak that look different from whales caught in the Yukon. Some are slender, and some are round.

Samples – Kits for collecting skin samples for genetics were handed out to every delegate. A single skin sample should go in each bottle or Ziploc. Cyrus Harris asked if the DMSO can be frozen and then thawed prior to sampling. Anna Bryan said this is okay. Morris Nakarak asked about the best location on the beluga to take a sample. Greg O'Corry-Crowe replied that skin is best, muscle or an organ will also work. Tom Gray and Kathy Frost said that NOAA policy and permitting do not allow the ABWC to pay for samples. However, someone in a community can be paid to collect beluga samples and information. It is the best interests of the hunters to collect samples. There was a drawing for prizes for every delegate who collected samples.

Tom Gray pointed out that the statewide beluga harvest is more than 300, but few samples are collected. The ABWC's goal should be to collect samples from every harvested beluga. If only 20-30 samples are collected each year, it will take a long time to get any answers. More samples will mean quicker results. Tom stressed that this is not a "science thing" or a "government thing" – it is a tool in our toolbox to keep belugas healthy and abundant in the future. Kathy Frost said the Inuvialuit have so much information about the belugas they harvest because they collect samples every year. Samples provide biological information that can be used to keep the harvest sustainable. Robert Suydam said that samples require a lot of work from everyone – hunters and scientists – but we can learn many things form them. New techniques in the future may allow us to learn things we never imagined about belugas. Greg O'Corry-Crowe reminded everyone we thought we'd answered most of the questions, but now the climate and the environment are changing. New techniques will allow us to ask new questions about the effects of these changes. Samples are a time capsule for future science.

Leonard Barger said that hunting is the way of life for Native people. Getting samples to learn more about belugas is important to our culture and will help us in the future. Tom Gray said the ABWC is monitoring stocks and taking responsibility so that Native people can manage their own harvest and hunting will still be an important part of their culture in the future. Kathy reminded the group that hunters have not been able to harvest Cook Inlet belugas for the last 30 years because they were overharvested. The federal government stepped in and took control. The ABWC is trying to prevent this from happening with other beluga stocks in Alaska.

ELECTIONS

Elections were held for Vice Chairman and two Members-at-Large. Elections for Chairman and Secretary alternate with elections for Vice Chairman and Members-at-Large. Marvin Okitkun, Albert Simon, and Leonard Barger were nominated for Vice Chair. Leonard Barger was elected. Tom Gray thanked Marvin Okitkun for his service as Vice Chairman. Billy Adams and Cyrus Harris were nominated to continue as Members-a-Large and were elected by acclaim.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES FOR 2024

Hunter delegates supported the following ABWC projects and research: hands on youth learning (culture camps); beluga diets; medicinal uses of belugas; more acoustics research; impacts of shipping on belugas, or education about what has already been done; movements and tagging in the Yukon; information about belugas in Russia.

Tom Gray thought that collecting more samples and education about belugas should be the ABWC's top priorities. Robert Suydam suggested that the ABWC use research funds to analyze the 2019 Beaufort Sea aerial survey data collected on the American side. He also suggested the ABCW should request more funds for analysis. John Citta suggested the ABWC support work to improve the genetics tools we have so we can learn more about belugas from the samples we collect. He thought genetics information about stock structure was more important than satellite tagging. Greg O'Corry Crowe thought there should be more work on genetic nuclear markers and more samples collected, especially from the Kuskokwim. Greg will estimate how much it would cost per sample to analyze these markers. He will also estimate the cost for a nuclear DNA project. Robert thought it would be a good idea to get someone to go to the Kuskokwim to locate beluga bones from historical commercial harvests and collect samples. Tom Gray said funds are needed to help Kathy Frost and that it is important to get results back to the hunters. Robyn Angliss supported genetics studies to better understand stock identification and work to improve aerial survey correction factors. Barb Mahoney suggested a poster to promote sample collection and Billy Adams thought a poster about not harvesting females with young would be good. Billy also thought it would be good to do more tagging.

Tom Gary asked the group to recognize John Burns for everything he has brought to the ABWC.

YOUTH REPORTS

Three young hunters commented on their experiences attending the ABWC. David Brown from Golovin (now living in Shishmaref) liked hearing hunters from different communities share their knowledge and talk about their different ways of hunting. He liked that scientists are involved and enjoyed hearing about the research.

Jesse Rogers from Dillingham thanked Ben Tinker and Wybon Rivers for referring him to the ABWC, and also Frank James for mentoring him in hunting belugas. He liked that the meeting was science-driven and added that he will be submitting samples and he hopes to come to future meetings. He would like to get more young people involved in beluga hunting in Bristol Bay.

Tyler Takak from Shaktoolik said that subsistence hunting can be difficult, and not everyone can do it. He thanked the ABWC for giving him the opportunity to participate.

Edward Prunes from Scammon Bay said that we should be looking at what the belugas eat and at issues like deep sea trawling. The ABWC has tools in their toolbox and resources like ADFG who could look into these things. He mentioned the five-year closure on moose and that after this closure the moose population rebounded. He suggested that a fishing closure could help the beluga. Hunting is not the only issue. Food limitation could be a big issue in the future.

Tom Gray highlighted Edward's passion about belugas and what they need. He encouraged Edward to not lose the passion he has for maintaining a healthy beluga population, and to figure out how to put that to work. It's important to dig in and analyze the issues, figure out how to fix problems and what to do, and how to make changes happen. The Native community needs spokespeople.

CLOSING

Tom Gray gave a big thank you to the North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management for their support of the ABWC. He gave a shout out to Penny Kennedy for her help with travel and to Kayla Scheimreif for her help with the minutes.

These minutes were prepared and submitted by Kathy Frost, ABWC Secretary, with assistance from Kayla Scheimreif from the NSB Department of Wildlife.

BYLAWS
ALASKA BELUGA WHALE COMMITTEE

ARTICLE 1. NAME AND PURPOSE

Section 1. Name

The name of this committee shall be the "Alaska Beluga Whale Committee."

Section 2. Purpose

The purpose of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee is to:

A. Facilitate and promote wise conservation, management, and use of beluga whales based on the best available information and socioeconomic considerations;

B. Provide information to the public, appropriate resource management agencies, or other interested parties, and to serve as a contact point for exchange of information on beluga whales;

C. Identify important beluga habitat and encourage its protection in the face of resource development and increased human activity in the coastal zone;

D. Promote development of a management plan for beluga whales;

E. Promote hunter education and use traditional knowledge to improve hunting and harvest techniques;

F. Promote and encourage planning, prioritization and carrying out of research required for wise conservation, management, and use of beluga whales;

G. Compile harvest statistics with active participation by coastal hunters in the development and implementation of harvest monitoring efforts;

H. Advocate cooperation by the United States with other nations and indigenous groups in exchanging information that contributes toward improved conservation and management of beluga whales;

I. Educate and promote understanding about beluga whale issues among users, resource managers, and other interest groups.

ARTICLE II. MEMBERSHIP

Section 1. Membership

A. Voting members of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee shall consist of:

1) Representatives from communities that harvest belugas in each of the following Alaska regions: North Slope, northeastern Chukchi Sea, Kotzebue Sound, Norton Sound, Yukon Delta, Kuskokwim, and Bristol Bay. Each region may also appoint an at-large regional representative.

2) Two representatives each from the US National Marine Fisheries Service, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, North Slope Borough, and others as determined and voted on by the Committee.

3) Charter members. Charter members include those who were present at either the first or the second meeting of the Committee.

B. Other members may be added by a vote of the Committee.

C. At its discretion, the Committee may include non-voting technical advisors who may attend meetings and participate in Committee discussions.

D. The Executive Committee, with input from the membership, shall determine the communities to be invited to attend the annual meeting. This will be based on community beluga harvest, past participation, regional beluga conservation and management issues, and the annual budget available for meeting travel.

E. Any beluga hunting community or region that is not covered by the Committee budget may send a representative to the annual meeting at its own cost. The name of that person must be submitted to the Executive Committee in advance.

Section 2. Selection

Committee members shall be selected and/or removed in the manner determined by the appropriate tribal council or regional organization. Each member should have a designated alternate to act in the absence of the regular member. Members will serve until their community appoints a different representative. Because ABWC representatives report and discuss matters related to beluga hunting, communities are strongly encouraged to appoint beluga hunters as their representatives.

Section 3. Withdrawal

Withdrawal from the Committee by a community, region or agency automatically relieves its member(s) or alternate member(s) from voting privileges and office (service or eligibility).

Section 4. Removal

Members will be removed for willfully disregarding the Committee's Management Plan or any agreements made with other parties by majority vote of Committee Members in a meeting. Members will be automatically removed from the Committee for felony convictions in local, state, or federal courts.

Section 5. Voting

Each member shall have one vote on all matters except for hunting matters defined in this paragraph. Alternates may vote at meetings in the absence of regular Committee members but shall not be eligible to hold office. Only native (1/4 native or tribal definition of native) representatives shall vote on matters relating to hunting. Votes on hunting matters related to specific beluga whale stocks which include limitations on take, issues relating to struck and loss rates, and other such matters as determined by the Committee shall be done by those affected.

Section 6. Addition of Members

Upon request, the Committee may consent to the seating of new members. A new member may be seated upon a majority vote of the members present and eligible to vote.

ARTICLE III. OFFICERS

Section 1. Election of Officers

Committee officers shall include a Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Secretary, and two Officers-at-Large. Officers shall be elected by a majority vote of the Committee members. Committee Officers shall compose the Executive Committee.

Section 2. Term of Office

Each officer shall serve for a two-year term or until the end of their appointment to the Committee. Officers may serve for consecutive terms. The Chairman and Secretary shall be elected the same year, and the remaining officers in the alternate year to ensure continuity.

Section 3. Replacement of Officers

If there is a vacancy of an office for any reason, that vacancy shall be filled at the next scheduled meeting of the Committee. If the Chairmanship becomes vacant, the Vice-Chairman shall assume the duties of Chairman until the next scheduled meeting.

Section 4. Removal of Officers

Officers may be removed from office by a two-thirds vote of a quorum of Committee members (refer to Article 4).

Section 5. Power of Officers

A. The Chairman shall have the following powers:

   1) to call and preside at all meetings of the Committee or the Executive Committee;

   2) to speak on behalf of the Committee and the Executive Committee;

   3) to authorize statements of Committee positions;

   4) to sign documents on behalf of the Committee; and

   5) to perform the duties of the office as prescribed by the Committee or the Executive Committee.

B. The Vice-Chairman shall have the following powers:

   1) in the absence of the Chairman or in the event of his or her inability or refusal to act, the Vice-Chairman shall perform the duties of the Chairman; and

   2) to perform other duties as prescribed by the Chairman, the Committee, or the Executive Committee.

C. The Secretary shall have the following powers and duties:

   1) to keep the minutes of all meetings of the Committee and Executive Committee and to make sure they are typed and distributed to all Committee members;

2) to attest to the action of the Committee and the Executive Committee; and

3) to perform other duties as prescribed by the Chairman, the Committee, or the Executive Committee.

D. The Officers-at-Large shall perform duties as may be assigned by the Chairman, the Committee, or the Executive Committee.

E. The Executive Committee shall consist of the Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Secretary, and the two Officers-at-Large. The Executive Committee shall have the power to act on matters that cannot be brought before the entire Alaska Beluga Whale Committee because of lack of time or funding. A majority vote of the members of the Executive Committee shall be required for action. On urgent matters, the Executive Committee may take action on the basis of a telephone conference or poll or by electronic mail. An attempt must be made to contact each Executive Committee member. The minutes from any Executive Committee meeting shall be presented at the next scheduled meeting of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee.

Section 6. Hearing Committee

The ABWC Hearing Committee shall consist of the ABWC Executive Committee and appropriate regional and hunter representatives as determined by the Executive Committee. The Hearing Committee will hold special hearings, as necessary, to resolve any infractions of the ABWC Management Plan that cannot be resolved at a local or regional level. A majority vote of the members of the Hearing Committee shall be required for action. The minutes from any special hearing by this committee must be made available to the full ABWC unless there is a compelling reason not to do so.

ARTICLE IV. MEETINGS

Section 1. Scheduling

Meetings shall be called as least once a year by the Chairman at times and places convenient to the Committee members. Meetings shall be preceded by no less than 14 days advance notice. Every effort should be made, given financial considerations, to convene the meetings at a variety of locations to allow local users or other interested parties to participate.

Section 2. Quorum.

A quorum for meetings shall require the presence of at least two-thirds of the committee members. A majority vote of the Committee members present at a meeting shall be required for Committee action.

ARTICLE V. ADMINISTRATION

Section 1. Administration

A Liaison Officer may be appointed by the Committee from its membership and shall coordinate with the Committee to implement the directives of the Committee.

Section 2. Office

The registered office of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee shall be c/o North Slope Borough, Department of Wildlife Management, Box 69, Barrow, AK 99723.

Section 3. Records

The official books and records of the Committee shall be maintained at the registered office of the Committee in Barrow, Alaska.

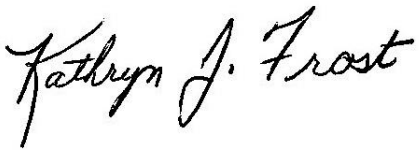
ARTICLE VI. ADOPTION AND AMENDMENTS

These bylaws of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee shall be considered in effect when they are adopted by the Committee.

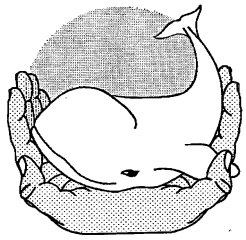
These bylaws may be amended by a majority vote of the Committee members present at the annual meetings. Members must receive prior notice that proposed amendments will be considered as an agenda item. Notice of the meeting must be mailed at least 30 days prior to the meeting at which the amendments are proposed and a copy of the proposed amendments must be included. If the required 30-day notice is to be waived, it must be waived in writing by each member in attendance at the meeting at which the action is taken without the required notice period.

CERTIFICATION

We do hereby certify that the foregoing Alaska Beluga Whale Committee Bylaws were adopted as amended at a duly convened meeting of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee on November 15, 2018. A quorum was present, and the Bylaws were approved by a unanimous vote in favor of adoption.



Tom Gray 11/15/2018 Attested by: Kathryn J. Frost 11/15/2018
Chairman Secretary



Alaska Beluga Whale Committee

P. O. Box 293
Kotzebue, AK 99752
Phone (907) 442-3733 Fax (907) 442-2764

ALASKA BELUGA WHALE MANAGEMENT PLAN

INTRODUCTION

Beluga whales in Alaska belong to two populations, one that spends the entire year in the Cook Inlet area and one that winters in the Bering Sea. The Cook Inlet population is made up of one stock while the Bering Sea population is made up of four stocks that migrate to traditional summering areas in Bristol Bay, the Yukon Delta and Norton Sound, the eastern Chukchi Sea, and the Beaufort Sea. Further studies are needed to document the movements, relationships, and accurate estimates of the size of these stocks.

Belugas are hunted in coastal Alaska from Cook Inlet to the Beaufort Sea. Belugas are an important traditional subsistence resource in many villages. In the village of Point Lay, for example, as much as 60% of the subsistence food can come from beluga whales in some years.

Beluga hunters and researchers have recently become concerned because of several events: organizations such as the International Whaling Commission have shown increased interest in managing Alaska beluga whales; large numbers of belugas have died in ice entrapments; increasing boating traffic seems to be keeping belugas from areas where they were once traditionally hunted; and reports of environmental contamination raise concerns about the health of belugas and the people eating them.

Representatives of beluga hunting villages and government agencies met in 1988 and formed the Alaska and Inuvialuit Beluga Whale Committee to address these concerns. In 1994, the structure and name of the committee changed slightly to better address regional concerns. The new name is the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee (ABWC). The organization is dedicated to the conservation of beluga whales and their habitat, and preservation of the traditional beluga whale hunt. The best means to achieve these goals is through co-management of belugas between hunters and government agencies and self-regulation by groups of hunters. This management plan outlines the principles by which the members of the ABWC will manage beluga whales.

ALASKA BELUGA WHALE MANAGEMENT PLAN

PARTS OF THE PLAN

CONSERVATION: Maintain a healthy beluga whale resource for subsistence use and public enjoyment by future generations.

HARVESTING: Encourage the safe and efficient harvest, processing, and use of beluga whales and reduce the number of struck and lost whales through regional management plans.

USE: Ensure that belugas are used as fully as possible in a non-wasteful manner.

REPORTING AND MONITORING: Obtain accurate harvest information and biological samples from each region in order to provide information needed to make sound management decisions.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT: Educate and promote understanding about beluga issues among users, resource managers, and other interested groups.

RESEARCH: Obtain biological information necessary for sound management and conservation of beluga whales, and incorporate appropriate traditional knowledge.

ENFORCEMENT: Oversee enforcement of regional management plans and hunting guidelines, and promote enforcement of habitat protection laws, in order to maintain healthy populations of beluga whales for future generations and to ensure hunting opportunities for the subsistence users.

GOALS OF THE PLAN

1) To Maintain healthy populations of beluga whales in Alaskan waters.

2) Provide for adequate subsistence harvest of beluga whales and protect hunting privileges for Alaskan subsistence hunters.

I. CONSERVATION

Goal - Maintain a healthy beluga whale resource for subsistence use and public enjoyment by future generations.

A. Habitat Protection

1. Identify and protect areas that are important for calving, feeding, migrating, and other biological processes.

2. Identify concentration areas and suggest ways to mitigate impacts of industrial and commercial activities in these areas.

B. Establish a reasonable harvest level. The harvest level will be based on the number of animals in the populations and cultural and subsistence needs. In the absence of adequate biological information, the harvest will be based on current community needs.

C. Identify and monitor industrial and commercial activities which may adversely affect beluga whale populations and the ability of subsistence users to hunt belugas, and make recommendations to minimize the effect upon beluga whales and hunting.

D. Encourage the international exchange of information and development of joint management plans for shared beluga stocks.

E. Encourage and assist in developing regional management plans and co-management agreements with NOAA/NMFS.

II. HARVESTING

Goal - Encourage the safe and efficient harvest, processing, and use of beluga whales and reduce the number of struck and lost whales through regional management plans.

A. Subsistence hunting guidelines should be established for each stock of belugas by the villages hunting from that stock.

B. Each region or village will include a section in their plans that shows steps needed to keep the number of struck and lost whales to a minimum.

C. Subsistence uses of beluga whales in each region shall be determined by the affected region.

III. USE OF BELUGA WHALES

Goal - Ensure that belugas are used as fully as possible in a non-wasteful manner.

A. Priority use shall be local consumption which includes traditional and customary use. This includes sharing, bartering, and customary trade of beluga products with other Alaska Natives that are non-commercial in nature.

B. Other uses of belugas may be allowed as long as the subsistence priority is met, the use is legal under existing United States law, and only if the affected communities and the ABWC are consulted, involved, approve, and support the use. Such uses might include the following: 1) tourism, 2) live capture, and 3) take for scientific purposes.

IV. REPORTING AND MONITORING

Goal - Obtain accurate harvest information and biological samples from each region in order to provide information needed to make sound management decisions.

A. Regional representatives will report all harvested and struck and lost belugas to the ABWC. This is to make sure that management decisions are made with correct and recent information. Whenever possible, forms will be filled out that will list the sex, length, color of the whale, area hunted, and information about hunting effort.

B. Harvest monitors will be hired from villages whenever possible. They will collect harvest information, measure harvested belugas, and collect biological samples.

C. Hunters will cooperate with the harvest monitors by providing harvest data and biological samples.

V. EDUCATION, INFORMATION, AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Goal - Educate and promote understanding about beluga issues among users, resource managers, and other interested groups.

A. Promote hunter education to improve hunting and harvest methods and harvest reporting.

B. Involve users and other interest groups in planning, prioritizing, and conducting research and in making regulations and management decisions.

C. Provide information to the public, appropriate resource management agencies, or other interested parties and serve as a contact for exchange of information about beluga whales.

D. Establish a training program to directly involve local people in harvest monitoring, sample collecting, and research.

VI. RESEARCH

Goal - Obtain biological information and traditional knowledge necessary for sound management and conservation of beluga whales.

A. All beluga research should be done in consultation with the ABWC and representatives of local communities.

B. The ABWC recommends the following types of biological research:

1. Determine how many different stocks of belugas there are in Alaska.

2. Develop population models for each stock of belugas. To create these models, the following information is required: population size, birth rate, sex and age composition, age of sexual maturity, and mortality.

3. Determine effects of man-made disturbance and noise.

4. Determine migration routes of all stocks.

5. Identify critical areas for calving, migration, and feeding.

6. Examine the interactions between fisheries and belugas.

7. Determine harmful contaminants in belugas.

8. Compile and incorporate traditional knowledge about beluga whales into research.

C. The ABWC recommends the following types of subsistence studies:

1. Document the use of belugas, how they are hunted, and their cultural and subsistence importance to beluga-hunting communities in Alaska.

2. Identify user groups.

3. Compile information from beluga whale harvest forms about where hunts take place, types of hunts, numbers of hours hunted, etc.

4. Conduct a feasibility study, upon request, on other potential uses of belugas including tourism and live capture.

VII. ENFORCEMENT

Goal - Oversee enforcement of regional management plans and hunting guidelines, and promote enforcement of habitat protection laws, in order to maintain healthy populations of beluga whales for future generations and to ensure future hunting opportunities for the subsistence users.

A. Each region, through consultation with the ABWC, will establish the enforcement procedures for their regional plans and for any agreements entered into with management agencies.

B. The ABWC Hearing Committee, consisting of the ABWC Executive Committee and appropriate regional and hunter representatives, will hold a special hearing if there is an infraction left unresolved at the regional level. The Hearing Committee will decide on the infraction in a timely manner.

C. If a person willfully disregards the decision of the ABWC Hearing Committee, the ABWC will refer the infraction to the NMFS enforcement agency.

CERTIFICATION

We do hereby certify that the foregoing Alaska Beluga Whale Management Plan was adopted as amended at a duly convened meeting of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee on December 1, 1995. The quorum was present, and the Plan was approved by a unanimous vote in favor of adoption.

Rosswell Schaeffer Chairman	Attested by: Kathryn J. Frost Secretary

The following organizations and villages have accepted the Management Plan:

NSB Fish & Game Management Committee	7/14/94
Little Diomede	1994
Native Village of Hooper Bay	11/21/96
Native Village of Kotlik	11/21/96
Native Village of Dillingham (Curyung)	11/25/96
Native Village of Kotzebue	11/25/96
Native Village of Shaktoolik	11/25/96
Native Village of Manokotak	11/26/96
Native Village of Elim	11/27/96
Native Village of Noatak	11/29/96
Native Village of Buckland	12/2/96
Native Village of Kivalina	12/2/96
Native Village of Point Lay	12/2/96
Native Village of Saint Michael	12/2/96
Native Village of Scammon Bay	12/2/96
Native Village of Koyuk	12/3//96
Native Village of Unalakleet	12/3/96
Native Village of Stebbins	12/4/96
Native Village of Clark's Point	1/14/97
Native Village of Togiak	2/10/97
Native Village of Barrow	2/25/97
Native Village of Chevak	2/26/97
Native Village of Emmonak	10/14/97
Alakanuk Tribal Council	10/20/97
Native Village of Point Hope	11/17/97
Native Village of Levelock	11/18/97
Native Village of South Naknek	6/30/00

Updated CERTIFICATION

The following 35 communities and organizations have signed resolutions of support for the ABWC, the ABWC Management Plan, and the ABWC-NOAA Co-Management Agreement as of November 2019. Many communities signed support resolutions in 1994-1997 and recertified their support in 2016-2018.

Community	ABWC Mngt Plan	Co-Mngt resolution	Updated Resolution
Beaufort Sea stock			
NSB Fish & Game Mngt Comm	7/14/1994		
Barrow	2/25/1997	11/13/2000	
Diomede	1994		4/29/2017
Kivalina	12/2/1996	11/10/2000	6/15/2017
Point Hope	11/17/1997		10/3/2018
Eastern Chukchi stock			
Point Lay	12/2/1996	11/21/2000	11/14/2016
Wainwright			2/27/2017
Kotzebue Sound			
Buckland	12/2/1996	11/2/1999	10/31/2016
Deering			12/14/2017
Kotzebue	11/25/1996	11/23/1999	1/26/2017
Noatak	11/29/1996	11/10/1999	10/28/2016
Eastern Bering Sea stock			
Norton Sound			
Council/Nome			11/9/2016
Elim	11/27/1996	11/2/1999	10/5/2018
Golovin			5/25/2017
Koyuk	12/3/1996	11/5/1999	12/8/2016
Saint Michael	12/2/1996	11/8/1999	1/6/2017
Shaktoolik	11/25/1996	11/8/1999	9/25/2017
Stebbins	12/4/1996	11/5/1999	1/4/2017
Unalakleet	12/3/1996	12/8/2000	1/19/2017
White Mountain		11/30/1999	1/27/2017
Yukon			
Alakanuk	10/20/1997	8/11/2000	11/7/17
Chevak	2/26/1997		
Emmonak	10/14/97		
Hooper Bay	11/21/1996	11/4/1999	10/26/2016
Kotlik	11/21/1996	12/5/2000	12/20/2016
Mountain Village			1/24/2017
Nunam Iqua (Sheldon Point)		11/9/2000	1/24/2017
Scammon Bay	12/2/1996	11/7/2000	1/11/2017
Kuskokwim			
AVCP			3/3/2017
Bristol Bay stock			
Aleknagik		12/20/1999	10/2/2017
Clark's Point	1/14/1997		11/2/2016
Curyung (Dillingham)	11/25/1996	1/11/2000	2/14/2017
Levelock	11/18/1997	11/8/1999	2/10/2017
Manokotak	11/26/1996	11/13/2000	11/16/2016
Naknek	6/30/1997		2/1/2017
Togiak	2/10/1997	11/9/2001	9/28/2017

AGREEMENT
between the
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
and the
ALASKA BELUGA WHALE COMMITTEE
for

CO-MANAGEMENT OF THE WESTERN ALASKA BELUGA WHALE POPULATION

I. PARTIES

This document constitutes an agreement between the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee (ABWC), otherwise referred to as the Parties.

This agreement is between ABWC and NMFS.

The ABWC is an association which represents Alaska Native beluga whale subsistence hunters within the State of Alaska who hunt from the Western Alaska beluga whale population and who are registered with the ABWC through registration with their Management Regions. It also includes Federal, State and local government representatives, and charter members as set forth in the ABWC Bylaws. The Western Alaska beluga population includes beluga whale stocks occurring in the Bering (including Bristol Bay), Chukchi and Beaufort seas and is referred to in this agreement as "Western Alaska beluga whales" or "the Western Alaska population."

The ABWC represents beluga whale subsistence hunters. It also includes government representatives and charter members who were at the first meeting.

The Western Alaska beluga population includes belugas in Bristol Bay and the Kuskokwim, the eastern Bering Sea (Yukon and Norton Sound), and the Chukchi and Beaufort seas.

II. AUTHORITIES

A. NMFS has the authority to enter into this Agreement with the ABWC under Section 119 (16 U.S.C. 1388) of the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, as amended (MMPA), and the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (ESA) (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq*.). Additional guidance is provided by Executive Order #13084 of May 14, 1998 ("Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments," 63 FR 27655), Presidential Memorandum of April 29, 1994 ("Government-to-Government Relations with Native American Tribal Governments," 59 FR No. 85). U.S. Department of Commerce Memorandum "American Indian and Alaska Native Policy of the U.S. Department of Commerce" of March 30, 1995, and the "Memorandum of Agreement for Negotiation of Marine Mammal Protection Act, Section 119 Agreements" of August, 1997.

NMFS can be a part of this agreement because of the Marine Mammal Protection Act and other federal laws.

Other federal agreements also allow NMFS to be part of this agreement.

B. The ABWC has the authority to enter into this Agreement under authorizing resolutions from those tribes and tribally-authorized organizations listed in Appendix A.

Twenty-four villages have authorized the ABWC to represent them in getting a co-management agreement for belugas

III. PURPOSES

The purposes of this Agreement between NMFS and the ABWC are to conserve the Western Alaska beluga whale population; protect Alaska Native beluga whale subsistence hunting traditions and culture; promote scientific research on beluga whales, whale stocks and their environment; and effectuate provisions of the Marine Mammal Protection Act that are relevant to aboriginal subsistence hunting of beluga whales. To achieve these purposes, this Agreement provides for:

The purposes of the Agreement are to:

1) conserve belugas
2) protect subsistence hunting
3) promote scientific research
4) make sure parts of the Marine Mammal Act affecting subsistence hunting are followed

A. Cooperation between members of the ABWC and NMFS in the conservation and management of Western Alaska beluga whales for the year 2000 and thereafter; and

B. The development of Regional Beluga Whale Management Plans to be entered into under this Agreement between the ABWC and the ABWC Management Regions.

To do these things:

1) The ABWC and NMFS will cooperate in conserving and managing beluga whales.

2) Prepare Regional Management Plans for local management of belugas

IV. BACKGROUND

In 1972, the Marine Mammal Protection Act was passed by Congress and provided for an exemption on the taking of any marine mammal by Alaska Natives provided such taking is for subsistence purposes or done for purposes of creating and selling authentic Native articles of handicraft and clothing. Such taking may not be accomplished in a wasteful manner.

The Marine Mammal Act was passed in 1972. It states that Alaska Natives may harvest marine mammals for subsistence or to make and sell Native clothing and handicraft things. Taking cannot be wasteful.

In 1988, the ABWC was established to facilitate cooperation and communication among beluga whale subsistence hunters, scientists, and the government regarding the conservation and management of beluga whales. The ABWC is composed of regional and village representatives from areas where hunting of the Western Alaska population of beluga whales takes place; beluga whale scientists; and members of Federal, State and local governments. On December 1, 1995, the ABWC adopted Bylaws and a Management Plan to conserve and manage the subsistence hunting of the Western Alaska beluga whale population. The Bylaws of the ABWC specify that only Alaska Native beluga hunters may vote on matters pertaining to hunting.

The ABWC was formed in 1988 to encourage cooperation and discussions among the hunters and the scientists and the government.

ABWC members include: 1) hunter representatives, 2) beluga whale scientists, 3) government representatives

The ABWC Beluga Management Plan says that only Alaska Native beluga hunters can vote on hunting matters.

In April 1994, the Marine Mammal Protection Act was amended to include Section 119 "Marine Mammal Cooperative Agreements in Alaska." Section 119 formalizes the rights of Alaska Native Organizations to participate in conservation-related co-management of subsistence resources and their use. Section 119 also authorized the appropriation of funds to be transferred by NMFS to Alaska Native Organizations to accomplish these activities.

In 1994, the Marine Mammal Act was changed to recognize the right of Alaska Native Organizations to participate in co-management of subsistence resources.

These changes in also authorized NMFS to spend money for co-management activities.

V. MANAGEMENT OF WESTERN ALASKA BELUGAS WHALES WITHIN THE STATE OF ALASKA

A. RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE ABWC

ABWC has responsibilities under this Agreement.

1. Management of the Western Alaska Beluga Whale Subsistence Hunt

   The ABWC Management Plan sets forth principles governing conservation, subsistence harvesting, use, reporting and monitoring, research, public involvement, and enforcement as they relate to beluga whales. Under this Agreement, the ABWC, through the ABWC Management Regions and in cooperation with NMFS, will manage the beluga whale subsistence harvest conducted by all member beluga whale subsistence hunting villages within the State of Alaska who hunt from the Western Alaska population of beluga whales. Any necessary enforcement of ABWC or Regional Management Plans will be accomplished according to the provisions of these plans. The authority and responsibilities of the ABWC and of each ABWC Management Region are contained in and limited by this Agreement, the ABWC Management Plan and the Regional Management Plans, as amended from time to time, to the extent the ABWC Management Plan and the Regional Management Plans are not inconsistent with this Agreement.

   The ABWC will manage the subsistence hunt for belugas according to its Management Plan.

   The ABWC will do this through the Management Regions. This means that decisions about management will be made on a local basis.

   The ABWC and the Management Regions will cooperate with NMFS.

   If any enforcement is necessary, it will be done according to Regional Management Plans, with help from the ABWC if necessary.

   This Agreement, together with the ABWC and Regional Management Plans, will be used to manage belugas

2. Inspection and Reporting.

   The ABWC shall obtain accurate harvest information and biological samples from each Management Region in accordance with the Regional Management Plan and in agreement with the ABWC Management Plan. NMFS personnel may participate in such data collection. All information collected under this section shall be shared between the ABWC and NMFS.

   The ABWC will collect accurate harvest information and samples from each Management Region.

   Information will be shared with NMFS.

3 Research

The ABWC, in consultation with NMFS, may conduct research on the biology, natural history and traditional knowledge of the Western Alaska population of beluga whales. NMFS personnel may participate in such data collection. All information collected under this section shall be shared between the ABWC and NMFS.

The ABWC may do research on belugas. They will keep NMFS informed about what they are doing. NMFS people can take part in the research. The information will be shared.

3. Funding

Pending the appropriation of Section 119 funds by Congress, the ABWC shall be responsible for costs incurred by its representatives participating in activities under this Agreement. Once Section 119 funds become available, ABWC may voluntarily, at its sole discretion, elect to support the goals of this Agreement by supplementing Section 119 funds with non-Section 119 funds that are available from other sources. No financial commitment on the part of the ABWC is authorized or required by this Agreement.

Until Congress provides additional funding, the ABWC will pay its own bills for co-management.

The ABWC always has the right to spend its own money on things it thinks are important.

This Agreement doesn't require ABWC to spend money.

B. RESPONSIBILITIES OF NMFS

1. Management of the Western Alaska Beluga Whale Subsistence Hunt

NMFS has primary responsibility within the United States Government for management and enforcement of programs concerning beluga whales. NMFS may assert its federal management authority to enforce any existing provisions of the Marine Mammal Protection Act that are applicable to the Native harvest of beluga whales. Such assertion of federal management authority will be preceded by consultation with the ABWC as specified in V.B.2 below.

NMFS is the government agency responsible for beluga whales.

NMFS has the right to enforce existing parts of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, but it must consult with the ABWC before it does this.

2. Research

NMFS, in consultation with the ABWC, may conduct research on the biology, natural history and traditional knowledge of the Western Alaska population of beluga whales. ABWC personnel may participate in such data collection. All information collected under this section shall be shared between the ABWC and NMFS.

NMFS may do research on belugas. They will keep the ABWC informed about what they are doing. ABWC people can take part in the research. The information will be shared.

3. Funding

NMFS shall provide funding, as available, pursuant to Section 119 of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, or in-kind support, for the beluga whale Inspection

and Reporting and Research responsibilities identified in sections V.A.2 and V.A.3, and other co-management responsibilities of the ABWC as set forth in this Agreement. Pending the appropriation of Section 119 funds by Congress, NMFS shall be responsible for costs incurred by its representatives participating in activities under this Agreement. Once Section 119 funds become available, NMFS may voluntarily, at its sole discretion, elect to support the goals of this Agreement by supplementing Section 119 funds with non-Section 119 funds that are available from other sources. No financial commitment on the part of the NMFS is authorized or required by this Agreement.

When Congress makes the money available, NMFS will provide funding to help the ABWC meet its responsibilities to monitor the harvest, do research, and do other co-management activities.

Until Congress provides additional funding, NMFS will pay its own bills for co-management.

NMFS always has the right to spend its own money on things it thinks are important.

This Agreement doesn't require NMFS to spend money.

VI. CONSULTATION

The ABWC and NMFS shall consult on an as-needed basis concerning matters related to management of Western Alaska beluga whales which either party believes are suitable for such consultation. This will include matters which have the potential to affect any Western Alaska beluga whale stock or the Native subsistence hunting of Western Alaska beluga whales. The Parties agree that they will consult on issues that may include but are not limited to any possible change in designation or status of Western Alaska beluga whales under any provision of the Marine Mammal Protection Act or the Endangered Species Act, or any changes in regulations or agreements that are applicable to Western Alaska beluga whales.

The ABWC and NMFS will consult about anything that either group thinks should be discussed about beluga management.

This includes things that might affect belugas or beluga hunting - such as decisions about the status of stocks and any proposed listings as depleted or endangered.

REGIONAL MANAGEMENT PLANS

Each Management Region within the ABWC shall have responsibility for preparing, in consultation with the ABWC, a Regional Management Plan for the management of the beluga whale subsistence hunt within that region. The Regional Management Plans shall be consistent with the provisions of the ABWC Management Plan and shall be submitted to the ABWC for approval. Any individual Regional Management Plan will be consistent with the Memorandum of Agreement for Negotiation of Marine Mammal Protection Act Section 119 Agreements.

Each Management Region will make a Regional Management Plan. The ABWC will help.

This Plan must agree with the ABWC Management Plan, and be approved by the ABWC.

VII. REGULATION AND ENFORCEMENT

NMFS recognizes the existing tribal authority to regulate tribal members during the conduct of the subsistence harvest of beluga whales. The ABWC recognizes the Secretary of Commerce's authority to enforce the existing provisions of the MMPA applicable to the Native harvest of beluga whales.

NMFS recognizes existing tribal authority to regulate tribal members during subsistence hunting of belugas.

ABWC recognizes the authority of NMFS to enforce the MMPA.

VIII. OTHER PROVISIONS

A. Nothing in this Agreement shall be construed to support or contradict an extension of the jurisdiction of the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, 1946, or the Whaling Convention Act of 1949 with respect to aboriginal subsistence beluga whale hunting by Alaska Natives.

Nothing in this Agreement affects or changes the involvement of the International Whaling Commission in beluga whale subsistence hunting issues.

B. Nothing herein is intended to conflict with current NOAA or NMFS directives. If the terms of this Agreement are inconsistent with existing laws, regulations, or directives of either of the Parties entering into this Agreement, then those portions of this Agreement which are determined to be inconsistent shall be invalid, but the remaining terms and conditions not affected by the inconsistency shall remain in full force and effect. At the first opportunity for review of the Agreement, all necessary changes will be accomplished by either an amendment to this Agreement or by a new Agreement, whichever is deemed expedient to the interest of both Parties.

This Agreement can't conflict with regulations of either the ABWC or NMFS. If it does, the part that disagrees will be thrown out and must be changed as soon as possible.

The rest of the Agreement stays in effect.

C. Should disagreements arise over the provisions of this Agreement, or amendments or revisions thereto, that cannot be resolved at the operating level, the area(s) of disagreement shall be stated in writing by each Party and presented to the other Party for consideration. If agreement on interpretation cannot be reached within a reasonable time, a special meeting or teleconference shall be held to resolve the issues. This meeting shall include representatives of NMFS, the ABWC Executive Committee and the affected Region(s) as appropriate.

If there are disagreements that are hard to work out, they will be stated in writing. Then, a special meeting will be held to work on a solution.

Meetings to work out disagreements will involve NMFS, ABWC and the Region that is affected, if appropriate.

IX. ADOPTION, DURATION, AND MODIFICATION

This Agreement will become effective when signed by both Parties, and may be amended at any time by written agreement of both Parties. Either Party may terminate this agreement by giving 45 days prior written Notice of Termination to the other Party.

X. SIGNATORIES

The Parties hereto have executed this Agreement as of the last written date below:

National Marine Fisheries Service

12/23/99
Steve Pennoyer — Date
Administrator, Alaska Region
National Marine Fisheries Service
U. S. Department of Commerce
P. O. Box 21668
Juneau, Alaska 99801

11/19/99
Ron Berg — Date
Deputy Administrator, Alaska Region

11/9/99
Douglas DeMaster — Date
Director, National Marine Mammal Lab

9 Nov 99
Barbara Mahoney — Date
ABWC Representative, Alaska Region

Alaska Beluga Whale Committee

11/09/99
Roswell Schaeffer — Date
Chairman
Alaska Beluga Whale Committee
P. O. Box 293
Kotzebue, Alaska 99752

11/09/99
Marie Adams Carroll — Date
Vice Chairman

11/9/99
Kathryn Frost — Date
Secretary

11/9/99
Molly Chythlook — Date
Treasurer

11/9/99
Charles Saccheus — Date
Sergeant at Arms

Cooperative Agreement between the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee and the National Marine Fisheries Service Entered into Pursuant to Section 119 of the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, As Amended

Appendix A

List of Tribally-authorized Organizations Providing Authorizing Resolutions to the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee. This list may be amended from time to time if additional authorizing resolutions are received from tribally authorized organizations representing villages with a history of hunting Western Alaska beluga whales, and with ABWC approval.

Tribally Authorized Organization	**Resolution Date**
Alakanuk Traditional Council	20 October 1997
Native Village of Barrow	25 February 1997
Buckland I.R.A. Council	2 December 1996
Chevak Traditional Council	26 February 1997
Native Village of Clarks Point	14 January 1997
Dillingham Native Village Council	25 November 1996
Native Village of Elim IRA Council	27 November 1996
Emmonak Tribal Council	14 October 1997
Native Village of Hooper Bay	21 November 1996
Kivalina City Council	2 December 1996
Native Village of Kotlik	21 November 1996
Kotzebue IRA Council	25 November 1996
Native Village of Koyuk IRA Council	3 December 1996
Native Village of Levelock	18 November 1997
Native Village of Manokotak	26 November 1996
Native Village of Noatak IRA Council	29 November 1996
North Slope Borough Fish and Game Management Committee	14 July 1994
Native Village of Point Hope	17 October 1997
Native Village of Point Lay IRA Village Council	2 December 1996
Native Village of Scammon Bay	2 December 1996
Native Village of Shaktoolik	25 November 1996
Native Village of South Naknek	30 June 2000
Native Village of Stebbins	4 December 1996
Native Village of St. Michael	2 December 1996
Traditional Council of Togiak	10 February 1997
Native Village of Unalakleet	3 December 1996

Updated CERTIFICATION

The following 35 communities and organizations have signed resolutions of support for the ABWC, the ABWC Management Plan, and the ABWC-NOAA Co-Management Agreement as of November 2018. Many communities signed support resolutions in 1994-1997 and recertified their support in 2016-2018.

Community	ABWC Mngt Plan	Co-Mngt resolution	Updated Resolution
Beaufort Sea stock			
NSB Fish & Game Mngt Comm	7/14/1994		
Barrow	2/25/1997	11/13/2000	
Diomede	1994		4/29/2017
Kivalina	12/2/1996	11/10/2000	6/15/2017
Point Hope	11/17/1997		10/3/2018
Eastern Chukchi stock			
Point Lay	12/2/1996	11/21/2000	11/14/2016
Wainwright			2/27/2017
Kotzebue Sound			
Buckland	12/2/1996	11/2/1999	10/31/2016
Deering			12/14/2017
Kotzebue	11/25/1996	11/23/1999	1/26/2017
Noatak	11/29/1996	11/10/1999	10/28/2016
Eastern Bering Sea stock			
Norton Sound			
Council/Nome			11/9/2016
Elim	11/27/1996	11/2/1999	10/5/2018
Golovin			5/25/2017
Koyuk	12/3/1996	11/5/1999	12/8/2016
Saint Michael	12/2/1996	11/8/1999	1/6/2017
Shaktoolik	11/25/1996	11/8/1999	9/25/2017
Stebbins	12/4/1996	11/5/1999	1/4/2017
Unalakleet	12/3/1996	12/8/2000	1/19/2017
White Mountain		11/30/1999	1/27/2017
Yukon			
Alakanuk	10/20/1997	8/11/2000	11/7/17
Chevak	2/26/1997		
Hooper Bay	11/21/1996	11/4/1999	10/26/2016
Kotlik	11/21/1996	12/5/2000	12/20/2016
Mountain Village			1/24/2017
Nunam Iqua (Sheldon Point)		11/9/2000	1/24/2017
Scammon Bay	12/2/1996	11/7/2000	1/11/2017
Kuskokwim			
AVCP			3/3/2017
Bristol Bay stock			
Aleknagik		12/20/1999	10/2/2017
Clark's Point	1/14/1997		11/2/2016
Curyung (Dillingham)	11/25/1996	1/11/2000	2/14/2017
Levelock	11/18/1997	11/8/1999	2/10/2017
Manokotak	11/26/1996	11/13/2000	11/16/2016
Naknek	6/30/1997		2/1/2017
Togiak	2/10/1997	11/9/2001	9/28/2017

Community _____

Alaska Beluga Whale Committee

2024
Beluga Harvest Report

Reporter _____ Phone _____ Email _____

1) **TOTAL belugas harvested in your community in 2024, all seasons combined?** _____

   Number of whites?_____ Number of grays? _____ number unknown color?_____

   How many by boats? _____ How many in nets? _____ How many at the lead?____

   Do you know How many Males? _____ How many Females? _____

2) **SUNK: How many belugas were sunk and lost in 2024? This is important!** _____
   To make sure the harvest is at a safe level, we need to know how many total belugas were killed.

3) **WINTER:** Were any belugas harvested in winter (January-March)? How many?

4) **SPRING:** Number harvested in SPRING? _____ What months (circle) Apr May Jun
   _____ whites _____ grays _____ STRUCK & LOST
   _____ by boat _____ by netting _____ from the lead/ice edge ___ shallow water ___ deep water

5) **SUMMER:** Number harvested in summer?_____ What months (circle) Jul Aug
   _____ whites _____ grays _____ STRUCK & LOST
   _____ by boat _____ by netting _____ from shore___ shallow water ___ deep water

6) **FALL:** Number harvested in fall?_____ What months (circle) Sep Oct Nov
   _____ whites _____ grays _____ STRUCK & LOST
   _____ by boat _____ by netting _____ from shore ___ shallow water ___ deep water

7) **If no belugas were harvested this year, why not** (write a comment about why no hunting)

8) Were there unusual beluga deaths or belugas washed up on the beach?

9) Did anyone see **Killer Whales** this year? If so, when and how many?

10) If you looked in any stomachs, **what were the belugas eating this year?**

11) **Is there anything interesting or unusual to report about belugas this year**? Write a comment about this year's hunting (write more on back)

12) If you know **harvest information about another village**, please write it.

Please mail to Kathy Frost, Alaska Beluga Whale Committee, 73-4388 Paiaha Street, Kailua Kona, HI 96740
Phone (808) 987-0001. email kjfrost@hawaii.rr.com OR Bring to the ABWC meeting in November

Reported landed harvest of beluga whales from western and northern Alaska, 2014-2023. Data provided by the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee. Numbers highlighted in gray are estimates based on average of other years. (Kathy Frost, ABWC Secretary, 4-18-24

Beaufort Sea stock	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**
Barrow	0	3	4	6	2	2	1	12	14	16
Diomede	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kaktovik	0	0	2	2	0	9	0	3	2	2
Kivalina	0	5	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0
Point Hope	24	35	37	2	11	7	44	20	51	32
Wales										1
TOTAL	**24**	**43**	**43**	**10**	**13**	**18**	**51**	**35**	**67**	**51**

Chukchi Sea tock	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**
Point Lay	16	48	0	33	52	29	6	15	7	11
Wainwright	34	23	14	5	13	0	0	50	51	17
TOTAL	**50**	**71**	**14**	**38**	**65**	**29**	**6**	**65**	**58**	**28**

Kotzebue Sound	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**
Buckland	2	0	4	0	1	0	0	1	3	1
Deering	0	0	1	0	2	0	3	1	1	0
Kivalina	2	0	0	0	3	4	0	3	12	7
Kotzebue	5	1	4	1	8	2	4	17	9	4
Noatak	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	1	4
Shishmaref								2	1	0
TOTAL	**10**	**1**	**9**	**2**	**15**	**6**	**7**	**28**	**27**	**16**

Eastern Bering Sea stock		**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**
Norton Sound											
Brevig Mission										7	1
Elim		33	22	31	28	35	36	30	25	14	15
Golovin		2	4	4	0	3	4	5	4	2	1
Koyuk		3	6	0	2	5	0	0	3	4	6
Nome/Council		19	6	6	2	7	4	16	3	9	9
Saint Michael		11	7	4	7	8	3	20	0	2	6
Shaktoolik		14	8	10	17	17	20	30	22	35	15
Stebbins		9	6	8	9	8	8	12	9	13	15
Unalakleet		20	25	23	21	2	8	2	4	4	8
White Mountain		5	6	1	5	2	3	0	2	0	0
Norton	**TOTAL**	**116**	**90**	**87**	**91**	**87**	**86**	**115**	**72**	**90**	**76**
Yukon											
Alakanuk		4	11	3	10	7	7	4	18	6	9
Chevak		4	2	4	1	2	8	10	8	2	4
Emmonak		12	9	16	4	8	8	5	13	7	19
Hooper Bay		30	14	12	31	12	31	35	34	24	13
Kotlik		23	27	8	13	14	20	26	22	22	17
Marshall		3	1	7	1	2	2	4	3	3	2
Mountain Village		5	2	5	5	13	7	6	9	1	7
Nunam Iqua		5	3	1	5	6	4	0	5	3	5
Pilot Stn		3	6	4	0	4	2	3	2	2	3
Pitka's Pt		4	10	3	1	1	1	3	6	2	1
Saint Mary		6	5	8	1	7	7	5	7	5	2
Scammon Bay		21	11	18	20	25	29	28	29	45	28
Russian Mission		nd	nd	nd	0	0	1	1	2	1	2
Yukon Total		**120**	**101**	**89**	**92**	**101**	**127**	**130**	**158**	**123**	**112**
Eastern Bering Sea	**TOTAL**	**236**	**191**	**176**	**183**	**188**	**213**	**245**	**230**	**213**	**188**

Kuskokwim	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**
Bethel									2	0
Eek	nd	nd	0	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	0	1
Goodnews	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kipnuk & Kwethluk	0	nd	0	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	0	2
Kongogonak	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	1	1	nd
Kwigillingok	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	1	1	1
Newtok	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	2	nd
Nightmute	nd	nd	2	nd	0	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd
Platinum	nd	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Quinhagak	1	2	2	1	2	5	5	3	3	3
Toksook Bay	1	4	4	0	0	5	6	13	9	
Tuntatuliak	nd	nd	0	0	nd	nd	nd	0	nd	nd
Tununak+mek	2	2	0	1	0	0	2	5	2	2
TOTAL	**4**	**8**	**8**	**3**	**2**	**12**	**13**	**23**	**20**	**21**

Bristol Bay stock	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2023**
Aleknagek	1	1	5	3	0	3	3	2	4	0
Clark's Point (+Ekuk)	5	4	4	2	0	2	1	0	1	2
Dillingham	1	3	5	1	5	3	4	3	7	6
Egegik	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Igiugig	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Iliamna	5	2	0	0	0	2	0	2	2	0
Levelock	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	1
Manokotak	6	4	1	2	3	3	4	4	2	4
Naknek/King S	3	1	2	0	0	0	2	2	2	0
New Stoyahok	nd	1	0	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	1	nd
Non-local hunters	4	5	1	2	1	6	0	1	0	0
Nushagak	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	nd	1	0
Togiak	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	**26**	**22**	**19**	**10**	**11**	**19**	**14**	**14**	**22**	**13**

TOTAL, all stocks	**350**	**336**	**269**	**246**	**294**	**297**	**336**	**395**	**407**	**340**

Skin samples for genetics

Skin samples are valuable for genetics studies to learn what population or stock a harvested beluga belongs to. This information is important for learning how to make sure the harvest is at a safe level and sustainable.

Stock identity is quite well known for belugas harvested in the Beaufort Sea, eastern Chukchi Sea (Point Lay & Wainwright), the eastern Bering Sea and Bristol Bay. However, major questions remain for belugas harvested in Kotzebue Sound and the Kuskokwim. Both of these areas once had unique stocks. The current status of these stocks is now unclear.

Hunters from the ABWC made the first genetics studies possible. They collected more than 2000 samples. Without the samples they collected, we would know very little about how the different groups of belugas are related to each other and which ones make up separate populations.

You can help! PLEASE COLLECT skin samples.

We only need a small piece of skin, about the size of the end of your finger.

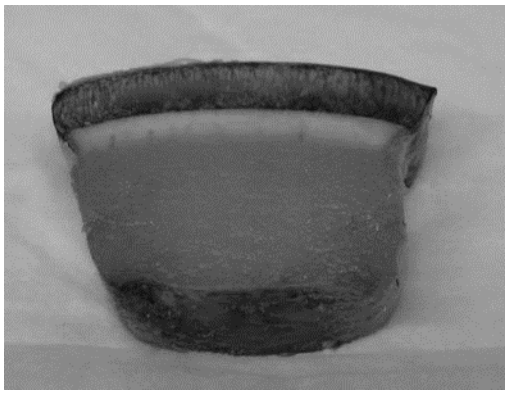
You can put the sample in a Ziploc or wrap it in foil and freeze it. Or you can ask for us to send you small sample bottles to put the samples in.

For each beluga sample we need to know:

- Village where harvested
- Date (or at least month) harvested
- Color of beluga
- Length of beluga (if possible) from end of nose to notch in the tail, straight line
- Sex if you can tell

Bring the samples to the ABWC meeting OR contact Lori Quakenbush about shipping.

Lori Quakenbush, ADF&G Wildlife
1300 College Rd., Fairbanks, AK 99701
907 459-7214 lori.quakenbush@alaska.gov

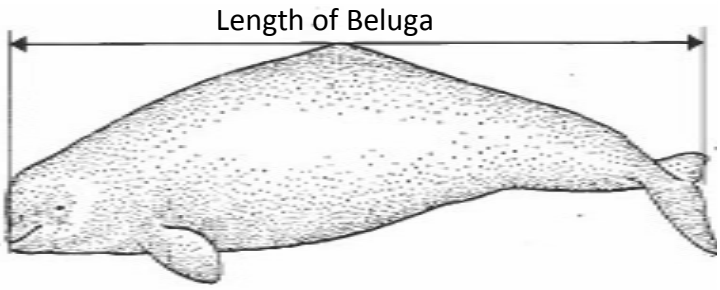


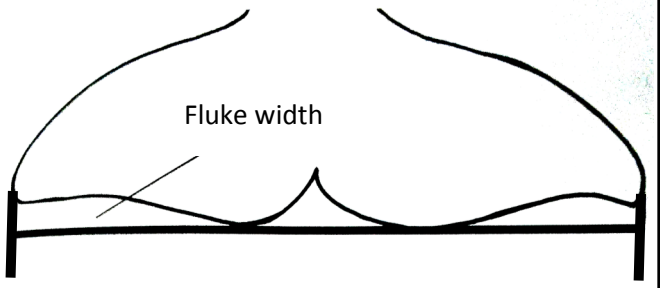
Beluga Samples

DATE HARVESTED:_____ **LOCATION OF HARVEST**:_____

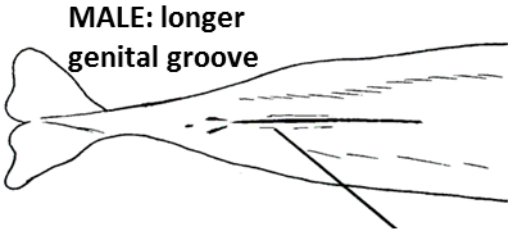
BELUGA COLOR (circle one) : White Gray-white Gray Dark-gray

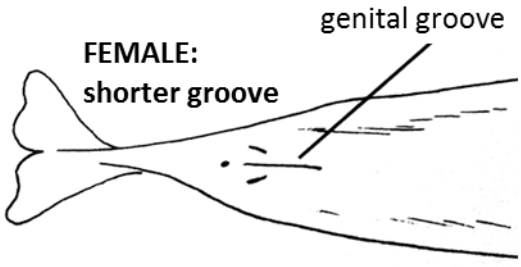
BELUGA LENGTH (measure from the lips to notch of tail in a straight line see drawing Below): ____feet _____inches OR _____cm **FLUKE WIDTH**: _____cm





BELUGA SEX (circle one):





SAMPLES: (please circle all collected)

Jaw Skin Stomach

Stomach: Place in garbage bag in tote. Try to not let any of the contents spill out.

Jaw: Cut through middle of lower jaw and take one whole half with the teeth. Place in tote.

Skin: Cut a piece of skin (size of your thumb nail) and place in vial with DMSO solution. Put vial in plastic bag.

COMMENTS:

_____

_____

_____

Ship to:
Lori Quakenbush—ADF&G
Arctic Marine Mammal Program
1300 College Rd.
Fairbanks, AK 99701
(800) 478-7346

Village _____ **YEAR** _____

Hunter names

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
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34. _____

2024 ESTERN BERING SEA SURVEY REPORT

ABSTRACT

The Eastern Bering Sea (EBS) beluga (Delphinapterus leucas) stock inhabits the waters of Norton Sound and the Yukon River Delta, Alaska, during the ice-free period from sea-ice breakup in spring to the beginning of freeze-up in autumn. During June, July, and August, belugas aggregate near the Yukon River Delta, where they feed on seasonally abundant anadromous fish such as Pacific herring (Clupea pallasii) and salmon (Oncorhynchus spp.). EBS belugas are an important nutritional and cultural resource for Alaska Natives, and are harvested by more than 20 communities near Norton Sound and the Yukon River. To collect data for an updated abundance estimate of EBS belugas, aerial line-transect surveys were conducted in Norton Sound and near the Yukon River Delta from 18 June through 1 July 2024. Flights were conducted on 7 days (18-21, 24, 30 June and 1 July) covering 6,934 km of transect effort. Within the study area, a high-density stratum, where belugas have been observed in large numbers during previous surveys in 2017 and 2022, was sampled multiple times.

A digital camera mounted in the belly port of the aircraft collected images primarily within the high-density stratum at 3-second intervals. A total of 29,031 images were collected. Images were reviewed to determine if an observer correction factor for belugas missed along the trackline (g(0)) could be estimated. Images will also be reviewed for age class based on skin color and size (calf, juvenile (light gray), adult (white)) and group composition. Caveats to developing a g(0) correction factor based on a review of sightings within the camera and observer fields of view are discussed.

Throughout the study area, 338 beluga groups totaling 1,716 belugas were sighted (328 sightings, 1,195 belugas on transect). This included 24 cow-calf pairs (23 observed on transect). Five beluga carcasses were also observed, photographed, and reported to the Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Network. The highest densities of belugas extended along the Yukon River Delta north of Scammon Bay within the 5 m depth contour, then east into Pastol Bay, broadening northward to Unalakleet within the 5-15 m depth contours. Other marine mammal sightings included a minke whale (Balaenoptera acutorostrata), a pod of six killer whales (Orcinus orca), harbor porpoises (Phocoena phocoena, 2 sightings, 4 total), 5 small, unidentified pinnipeds, and one unidentified marine mammal.

Compared to the 2017 and 2022 surveys, the encounter rate of belugas (whales/km) observed on transect in 2024 was slightly lower, though this was largely due to diverting from the trackline north of Scammon Bay, where a group of approximately 500 belugas were sighted while circling, and therefore not included in the encounter rate. Similar to 2022, some of the largest groups were observed north of Scammon Bay in 2024, an area not surveyed in 2017.

Subsistence Harvest and Iñupiaq Knowledge of Beluga Whales for Wainwright, Alaska

This research intends to collaboratively document subsistence practices, cultural values, and ecological knowledge of beluga whales in Wainwright, Alaska. This focus on beluga will add valuable context and perspective to compliment the ADF&G-Wainwright comprehensive subsistence harvest study.

This project is funded by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) through a cooperative agreement. BOEM's mission is to manage development of U.S. Outer Continental Shelf energy and mineral resources in an environmentally and economically responsible way. In order to do this, they rely on the best available information, including both science and information from indigenous knowledge holders.

This project will take place over a 3-year time period 2023-2026.

WHO WE ARE:

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence was formed in 1978 to document customary and traditional uses of Alaska's fish and wildlife resources. We conduct research in partnership with communities throughout Alaska to document historical and contemporary subsistence practices. This information is used to ensure that subsistence is prioritized in wildlife management plans and regulations, and that land use and development plans recognize and incorporate the needs of subsistence users. Helen coordinates ADF&G Subsistence research partnerships with communities across the Seward Peninsula, Northwest Arctic, and North Slope.

The University of Alaska Fairbanks Department of Anthropology was founded in 1935 as part of the College of Arts and Sciences. Our program stands alone in the United States for our holistic approach to circumpolar studies, providing instruction and research in all aspects of anthropology. One way our graduate student research assistants gain experience in the life cycle of a research project is by producing a focused thesis or dissertation out of a larger study. Daniel is interested in focusing his thesis research on exploring the social and cultural significance of beluga through talking about recipes.

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PRIMARY RESEARCH GOALS:

1) To document and build on prior Iñupiaq Knowledge of beluga whales in the eastern Chukchi and western Beaufort Seas

Wainwright hunters hold unique knowledge specific to beluga who spend summers in the eastern Chukchi and western Beaufort Sea. This research is an opportunity for residents of Wainwright to share their expertise by updating and expanding prior research that documented beluga hunting information. Furthermore, this research will contribute to conversations with residents of other Arctic communities, scientists, and co-management groups like the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee.

Topics could include: migration routes and timing, feeding patterns and habitat, health and abundance, etc.

2) Document subsistence hunting practices and the importance of beluga to Wainwright residents

Documenting subsistence hunting practices can ensure accurate information about subsistence is available and this information can be used to advocate for subsistence rights by both the Native Village of Wainwright and other agencies/ organizations. Understanding the practices of hunting for beluga whales from local perspectives is critical for accurately describing the importance of these and other animals for Wainwright residents.

Topics could include: hunting practices, areas used for beluga hunting, butchering and processing techniques, preparing and cooking, sharing, concerns about management of beluga, cultural value of beluga, etc.

Schedule:

1. Consult with Village of Wainwright, City of Wainwright, and Olgoonik Corporation: Introduce project, exchange ideas about community priorities for research questions and ways of working together. (Summer 2023)
2. Work with community partners to develop research plan.
3. Form an advisory committee for the project and hire a lead local research assistant to help steer and conduct the project. The research team and advisory committee will finalize interview methods and topics. (Fall 2023-Winter 2024)
4. Data collection - active research phase: (Fall 2023-Fall 2025)
   - » Interview up to nine beluga hunters and knowledge holders. Interview participants will be compensated for their time and sharing their knowledge. Respondents will have the choice to add their interview to an oral history archive or remain confidential.
   - » Document subsistence harvesting and processing of beluga in summers of 2024 and 2025. Photography or video only with consent of community and those involved in the activities.
5. Review and discuss initial results of the project with interview participants, the Village of Wainwright, and City of Wainwright. (Fall 2024-Winter 2026)
6. Synthesize results into formats useful for different audiences. Prior to any publication, ensure that data products are reviewed and approved by VOW and the City, and ensure that participants receive appropriate acknowledgment for their contribution to the project. (Fall 2025-Fall 2026)

3) Passing on traditional knowledge of beluga to younger generations

Wainwright's community beluga hunts provide opportunities for youth to learn knowledge, skills, and values from knowledgeable community members. This project prioritizes this continued intergenerational transmission of knowledge by proposing to produce an educational product with and for the Alak School.

Topics and methods could include: safe hunting and food handling; local stories and observations about belugas; audiovisual documentation of recipes for catching, cutting, cooking/preparing, and serving or sharing beluga; interviews with beluga hunters and chefs.

4) Additional Goals:

- A research partnership that fosters collaboration and relationship building between project partners.
- Understand how a changing climate may be impacting beluga and hunting for beluga.

Alaska Beluga Whale Committee-National Marine Fisheries Service Co-Management Meeting

Date: 8 December 2023

Location: Hilton Hotel, Anchorage, AK

Participants

ABWC: Tom Gray (Chair), Leonard Barger (Vice-Chair), Billy Adams (Member-at-Large), Kathy Frost (Secretary), Robert Suydam (Member, technical support), John Citta (Member, technical support), Lori Quakenbush (Member, technical support), Kayla Scheimreif (NSB Dept. Wildlife Management).

NMFS: John Bengston (Director, Marine Mammal Laboratory (MML), Alaska Fisheries Science Center), Robyn Angliss (Program Manager, Cetacean Assessment and Ecology, MML), Anne Marie Eich (Protected Resources Division, Alaska Regional Office), Barbara Mahoney (Protected Resources Division, Alaska Regional Office), Paul Wade (Cetacean Assessment and Ecology, MML), Amilee Wilson (Tribal Relations Coordinator, Alaska Regional Office).

Introduction

The Alaska Beluga Whale Committee (ABWC) and selected individuals from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) meet periodically to facilitate communication and coordination for the co-management of beluga whales in western and northern Alaska. Typically, they meet immediately following the annual ABWC meeting. On 8 Dec 2023, seven ABWC members (four Executive Committee and three ABWC science team members) met with six representatives from NMFS: three from the Alaska Regional Office and three from the Marine Mammal Laboratory of the Alaska Fisheries Science Center. They discussed aerial surveys of belugas in the Eastern Bering Sea stock, the designation of Kotzebue Sound belugas as a unique stock, and the status of several Stock Assessment Reports for belugas in Alaska (Bristol Bay and Eastern Chukchi Sea). The agenda is attached to this summary.

2024 Eastern Bering Sea Surveys

Background

- The ABWC expressed concern about the adequacy of the 2022 EBS aerial surveys based on limited survey hours and poor weather and requested that NMFS conduct another EBS survey in 2024. In June-July 2024, NMFS, with support from the ABWC, will fly an aerial survey for EBS belugas.
- In its 2023 ANO Co-management funding proposal, ABWC requested $150,000 to pay for aircraft hours and fuel required to conduct the 2024 aerial survey of EBS belugas. That proposal indicated that costs for aircraft availability, per diem (pilots + survey personnel), personnel, other survey related expenses and aircraft hours for transit would be funded by NMFS MML as part of their aerial survey program and their co-management partnership with the ABWC.
- During reallocation of unexpended ABWC grant funds due to Covid, another $50,000 was earmarked for EBS surveys.

Discussion

- NMFS has 16 days available for surveys in 2024. Gray said surveys were not flown on enough days in 2022 and that we need more flexibility to get a good survey. Wade clarified that there were only 11 available flight days in 2022 where there are now 16.
- There was a discussion of how many survey hours would be flown – 40 or 60. Wade recommended the 60-hour survey if possible. In 2017, 60 hours were flown. The weather was great and funds were sufficient to fly more than the allotted flight hours. In 2022 only about 30 hours were flown. Wade

indicated that a stratified survey of only 40 hours would likely be a better than the 2022 survey. Citta thought a 60 hour survey would produce a more robust abundance estimate, but that stratifying the survey with more effort nearshore was acceptable. Angliss indicated the newly designed survey will take better advantage of the available hours.

- Angliss said the NMFS financial contribution will be capped at $85,000 plus salaries for participants. Per diem and lodging is estimated to be $80,000. Angliss requested that ABWC cover all flight hours, fuel, and pilot costs. If the ABWC's money and NMFS's $85,000 contribution can't support 60 flight hours Angliss said it would be necessary to consider reducing flight time. Bengtson said NMFS does not yet have its budget from Congress and everyone needs to work together to get things done. Bengtson said it may be possible to cancel seal work to obtain extra funding.
- The ABWC has $200,000 available for EBS surveys. Suydam and Citta suggested a survey budget be developed based on current aircraft, fuel and accommodation costs. The number of flight hours will be determined by ABWC's budget and any other funds that can be found. Flight costs have increased substantially since the original budget was prepared.
- Gray said we need to fly until we have a good survey. "Good enough" is not an adequate criterion for surveys that impact people's lives and food security. ABWC wants to be a good partner but Gray questioned whether it is ABWC's responsibility to fund aerial surveys. Mahoney asked why MML was asking its co-managers for funding. Other ANOs are not asked to finance aerial surveys. Eich reminded everyone that if ABWC needs to find more money it will be Section 119 funds and suggested that MML go directly to the Alaska Region to request funds. Frost questioned why it is the ABWC's job to support MML surveys, and that requesting the ABWC to find $200,000 is a significant request. Suydam thinks there is a mismatch in responsibility. If it costs more than the cumulative $285,000 to fly 60 hours, NMFS should obtain additional funding. Bengtson agreed that it should not be the ABWC's responsibility to ask the Alaska Regional Office for more money. NMFS and ABWC are partners and have shared goals.
- (This discussion occurred following the Beaufort Sea survey update.) Gray asked if 2024 EBS survey results would be available by the 2024 ABWC meeting. Angliss said no but that results should be available by the 2025 ABWC meeting. Bengtson said he will try to meet the goal but never guarantees a date.
- Suydam asked if anything could be built into the upcoming 2024 EBS aerial surveys that would improve correction factors. Angliss said NMFS plans to install a low-cost camera system in the plane but there is no money to analyze the data. Bengtson thought the cameras may help with detecting calves and calculating surfacing rate.

2022 Eastern Bering Sea Survey Results

Background

- In 2022, NMFS, with support from the ABWC, conducted an aerial survey of EBS belugas.
- An abundance estimate based on the 2022 surveys was not available to the ABWC prior to the ABWC meeting, despite repeated requests by ABWC.
- NMFS indicated that staff turnover and the use of new methods have delayed the results.

Discussion

- Gray thanked Bengtson, Wade and NMFS for providing a 2022 EBS abundance estimate to the ABWC at its EBS workshop. This strengthens the ABWC-NMFS partnership. Bengtson stressed that the estimate is preliminary, may change, and there is no manuscript ready for review. Suydam asked

whether ABWC would receive a copy of the manuscript at the time it is circulated for internal NMFS review. Bengtson thought that could work, but that there are institutional rules that may affect the sharing of manuscripts.

- Suydam said the IWC expects to receive the 2022 EBS results manuscript by the end of December 2023. It will be distributed for review and discussed it at the Scientific Committee meeting in April/May 2024. The SC review focuses primarily on analytical methods, not survey design. If the methods are considered satisfactory and the estimate is accepted it, it will be posted on the IWC website in the list of abundance estimates. If not, reviewers will make recommendations to the authors. If the December submission deadline is not met, the IWC will likely not review the manuscript until 2026.
- Bengtson acknowledged that both ABWC and NMFS are disappointed the manuscript is late. He wants his staff to review it before it is seen by anyone else since the surveys are a NMFS program. Frost reiterated that ABWC is a collaborator in the surveys and should be considered as a co-author.
- Bengtson reminded everyone that ABWC, not NMFS, requested the IWC review. Suydam suggested working hard to submit the draft to IWC by the deadline. Wade reiterated that the greatest benefit of IWC review is review of the methods. This is important because the methods for the 2022 analysis are somewhat new. John Bengtson asked if the ABWC was OK with receiving the paper a day before other reviewers. Frost said that ABWC would like to receive the manuscript no later than when it is sent to other reviewers.
- (This discussion occurred following the Beaufort Sea survey update.) Gray is concerned about the high confidence interval for the 2022 abundance estimate. Angliss emphasized that NMFS has not settled on a final analytical model and the estimate is not yet final. Suydam said a more conservative estimate of sustainable take is usually used when the confidence interval for the abundance estimate is high.

Kotzebue Sound Belugas

Background

- In November 2021, ABWC requested that NMFS designate Kotzebue Sound belugas as a separate stock. Before this can be done, NMFS must recognize them as a demographically independent population (DIP).
- In 2022, NMFS established a Working Group to determine whether Kotzebue Sound belugas are a DIP. The WG agreed that genetics data collected before the 1980s decline show that there was an historic beluga DIP in Kotzebue Sound.
- NMFS provided a draft DIP document for Kotzebue Sound belugas at the 2023 ABWC meeting.

Discussion

- Harris requested that NMFS provide the document to the Native Village of Kotzebue and others for review. Angliss will provide an electronic version for ABWC to distribute for comment to the Tribal Councils that signed the Kotzebue Beluga Plan for review and comment.
- Suydam asked about the NMFS process for determining whether Kotzebue Sound belugas are a separate stock. Angliss said that Alaska Fisheries Science Center MML will summarize available information and make a recommendation to the Alaska Regional Office (ARO) about whether or not there is a DIP. Together, ARO and MML will determine whether there is a separate stock. Frost asked why there is so much uncertainty about this when genetics show that Kotzebue Sound belugas were an historical stock. Angliss clarified that it isn't clear the stock still exists.

- Angliss said that NMFS needs Traditional Knowledge to support a stock designation. Frost responded that the stocks have been separated based on science, not TK, and that stock is a scientific concept. Barger (whose home town was Kotzebue) said that Kotzebue Sound belugas have always been the same and they still behave the same. Bengtson said that tagging and acoustics data are inconclusive although Frost noted that no tagged animal from another stock has entered Kotzebue Sound.
- Bengtson said that NMFS does not doubt the existence of a distinct Kotzebue stock historically. However, since the decline in the 1980s, few samples have been collected. Barger said people don't want to give samples because they think NMFS will regulate their hunting. He tells hunters that science is important to allow hunting to continue. Frost noted that O'Corry-Crowe presented data showing that recent samples are overwhelmed by the influx of Beaufort Sea belugas in 1996 and 2007 during unusual ice conditions. Excluding 1996 and 2007, the remaining samples are more similar to the historical Kotzebue Sound stock.
- Suydam asked about timing of the DIP process. Angliss said if Kotzebue Sound belugas are determined to be a stock, NMFS will add language to a SAR in fall 2024. NMFS needs feedback from ABWC on the draft DIP document. Frost will request input from the Tribal Councils, but doesn't expect to receive comments. Gray concurred, but ABWC will provide TCs the opportunity to respond. Suydam will take the lead on preparing comments for ABWC and will submit them soon.
- Angliss asked if ABWC still thinks outreach should occur after the DIP report is completed but before the stock determination process. If so, who should do the outreach? Gray thinks it is paramount that NMFS goes to the villages and inform them about the findings and the process. ABWC should be involved in the process. Gray said it may be too late to implement meaningful regulations, but harvested belugas should be sampled to better understand the situation. Emphasis should be on staying away from the original stock and harvesting belugas from other stocks later in the summer. Suydam said the sooner and more frequently NMFS visits the communities, the better it will be. Open and honest discussions won't occur if the agency isn't meeting with communities. Barger recommended that NMFS should bring a Native person to the villages to help communicate, and that he would be willing to do this. In the past, elders have told him that they would rather hear the information from him than from white people. The meetings should occur in winter, not after hunting has started. Frost said the situation is complicated because many of the elders who developed the Kotzebue Beluga Plan and were passionate about preserving Kotzebue Sound belugas are gone. The young hunters don't have the same goals.
- Angliss is concerned about the cost of travel to go to the villages. Gray emphasized that NMFS should prioritize funding for travel to villages because we're talking about food on peoples' plates. Bengtson is concerned about funding and thanked the ABWC for the offer of help with outreach .
- Bengtson stressed the importance of TK in the DIP and stock designation process. Gray stressed that the Kotzebue Tribal Beluga Plan was designed by elders and reflects TK. NMFS needs to see that the management plan *is TK*.
- Bengtson asked Gray what he meant by "missing our chance" in Kotzebue Sound. Gray replied that Cook Inlet is an example: hunting has not occurred there for more than 20 years but the stock has not recovered. Although we believe there are still individuals left from the Kotzebue Sound stock, this stock may never recover. The best future is that belugas from other stocks will move into Kotzebue Sound. Without designation as a stock, Kotzebue Sound belugas won't get any attention.
- Eich asked about the purpose of designating DIPs and stocks when hunters don't want federal management in the villages. Gray said that if NMFS highlights the issue, it raises awareness. Hunters

will take the management plan more seriously if there is a designated stock. Gray said that ultimately, NMFS is responsible for managing belugas. Bengtson said that belugas are managed through co-management. Adams asked what we are going to get out of all of this. A lot of money will be spent for what results?

- Frost reiterated that people don't want government interference, and that the elders developed the Kotzebue Sound Beluga Plan so that hunters could manage belugas themselves without the government telling them what to do. However, the harvest increased after the plan was adopted. Times have changed, communication is different, and elders and youth don't talk. No one wants outside management, but if there is no local cooperation how do you move forward? If you don't want someone else to get in your business you have to take care of it yourself. If the management plan didn't work and talking to the hunters didn't work, maybe we should give up. Quakenbush replied that if we give up, the ABWC will become irrelevant. Suydam stressed that this was a local plan. At Buckland's request, the ABWC tried to move the plan forward. Although the Tribal Councils have adopted the plan, the hunters have not followed it. ABWC has asked NMFS for help. When the Federal government gets involved, it raises awareness. Perceived pressure and awareness may engage people. Doing nothing costs nothing, but Kotzebue Sound belugas may disappear. Is that OK?
- Wilson said that NMFS has funding for some staff and possibly scientists to conduct "equity and environmental justice" meetings where information about beluga biology could be presented.
- Mahoney noted that as soon as a Kotzebue Sound stock is defined, NMFS will end up in court. Citta thinks that ignoring the issue is the wrong call. Talking to the communities is a good idea. Suydam asked about the implications if listing Kotzebue Sound belugas as a stock. If they are listed as a stock, the Center for Biological Diversity would probably petition to list them as endangered. People are fearful that the Endangered Species Act (ESA) shuts down subsistence hunting: it does not automatically do that. Under the ESA, critical habitat can be designated. Other subsistence species such as bowhead whales and ringed seals are listed and still harvested. If Kotzebue Sound has a harvest management plan, it helps the outcome. The villages need to understand the situation. Eich asked how NMFS can communicate about the DIP without being threatening? Suydam replied that NMFS needs to go to the villages. If they had started going 10 years ago, there might be more mutual trust. Starting now, it will be difficult.
- Gray said we must be prepared for hard questions, but Kotzebue will set a precedent. If we walk away, we will be unable to protect belugas anywhere else.
- Following this meeting, Angliss will send the DIP document to Frost who will to send it to the TCs of affected villages. Suydam will send ABWC's comments on the DIP document to NMFS. Barger and Adams are available to go participate in village visits.

Bristol Bay Beluga Update

- Angliss requested comments on the Bristol Bay SAR by late January, before it goes to the SRG.
- Quakenbush said the abundance estimate from the 2022 Bristol Bay aerial survey was lower than the 2016 surveys, although she doesn't think the population is necessarily declining. The next survey should happen in 5-7 years unless there is concern the stock is declining.
- Gray hopes more samples are collected from BB, EBS and the Kuskokwim to learn whether individuals from Bristol Bay might be going elsewhere. Quakenbush said the EBS stock is so large it would be unlikely to detect a few BB belugas.

- Citta said samples would be helpful for close-kin-mark-recapture. Suydam asked how the cost of a biopsy program compared to the cost of aerial surveys. Frost said a biopsy program is more expensive than an ADFG survey and about the same as a NMFS survey.
- Quakenbush thinks the 2022 abundance estimate is comparable to previous estimates: the methods and analysis are similar. Gray suggested that a new survey could wait until the scheduled time since the harvest is low. Suydam suggested that BB survey be discussed again at meeting in 2024.

Eastern Chukchi Sea Beluga SAR

Background

- NMFS provided a draft of proposed revisions to the 2023 Eastern Chukchi Sea Beluga SAR in March and the ABWC responded with its concerns.
- NMFS understands that there are issues with the ECS SAR. ABWC does not think Kotzebue Sound belugas should be included in the SAR. The SRG had concerns around how the harvest should be allocated between the ECS and BS stocks. There was also concern about how the abundance estimate might be affected by overlap between ECS and BS stocks during aerial surveys.

Discussion

- Angliss said a statement will be included at the top of the SAR describing outstanding issues which need to be resolved between now and fall 2024. A new SAR needs to be done for next year. Angliss doesn't think there is a rush to do a new SAR since the population is quite large and the harvest relatively small.
- Citta said the SRG made recommendations, but didn't suggest delaying the revised SAR. The ECS SAR is as good as any other existing beluga SAR. The ESC stock is not a management issue. Suydam suggested a new review can wait until 2025.
- Bengtson asked Citta where Kotzebue Sound belugas should be dealt with if they are removed from the ECS SRG. Citta recommended preparing a separate SAR for Kotzebue Sound belugas. Angliss suggested leaving Kotzebue Sound belugas in the current ECS SAR but adding a comment that it will be dealt with in the next SAR.

Next Eastern Chukchi Sea Beluga Surveys

Background

- NMFS will conduct a bowhead aerial survey in 2025.
- Angliss suggested doing an ECS beluga survey in conjunction with the bowhead survey.

Discussion

- Beluga surveys should be flown a little earlier in the year than the 2019 bowhead surveys occurred. Angliss does not want to jeopardize the bowhead survey results. Citta said Ferguson is concerned about surveying too early due to ice, and also about altering the time series of ASAMM surveys by flying earlier.
- Suydam said the surveys will require extensive meetings and discussion with the Canadians and planning should start soon. Angliss has contacted DFO and will talk with them after this meeting. Suydam and Adams said the NSB did this outreach in 2019, and Adams would be happy to do it again. Citta reminded NMFS that the NSB is contributing $800,000 to the surveys and wants to be included on any communication with other partners.

Beaufort Sea 2019 Beluga Survey Results

Background

- Canadian DFO will release the abundance estimate for Eastern Beaufort Sea beluga stock based on their 2019 beluga surveys by the end of December 2023.

- Angliss said that there are no plans for NMFS to analyze the 2019 beluga data collected in conjunction with NMFS bowhead surveys. Ferguson's position has not been filled and bowhead surveys will be the new hire's highest priority.

Discussion

- Suydam suggested the ABWC find money and someone to analyze the NMFS 2019 beluga data. The bowhead surveys that counted belugas in the Beaufort Sea covered areas that the Canadians did not. Angliss confirmed that the NMFS data will be available to the ABWC if funding and an analyst can be found.

Reorganizing Annual Meeting Schedule

Angliss proposed that the co-management meeting occur before the ABWC meeting rather than after. Suydam thought it was useful to discuss the issues that came up at the meeting with NMFS afterwards. Grey preferred for the meeting to occur after the ABWC meeting.

Angliss requested there be a discussion about how NMFS and ABWC are going to go address the Kotzebue issue two weeks prior to the ABWC meeting. Suydam suggested this discussion occur by teleconference and focus only on the thorniest issues, with an in-person meeting at the end. Gray concurred, but only if a teleconference is absolutely necessary.

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5 November 2024

Mr. Tom Gray, Chairman
Alaska Beluga Whale Committee
P.O. Box 306
Nome, AK 99762

Dear Tom:

At the recommendation of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee, NMFS staff (Anne Marie Eich, Barbara Mahoney, Robyn Angliss, and I) traveled in August 2024 to four villages in the Kotzebue Sound area that hunt beluga whales. NMFS talked about the progress toward understanding whether there is a unique population of beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound that constitutes a Demographically Independent Population (DIP). Public meetings were held in villages in the evenings, when a brief presentation was provided (see attached), followed by a discussion and listening session with all who attended the meeting.

Our planned visit to Kivalina needed to be postponed due to transportation problems caused by inclement weather. Therefore, we plan to reschedule an in-person or virtual meeting as soon as feasible to share information and to hear from residents of Kivalina. We also plan to host a second public meeting in the Native Village of Kotzebue.

The following bullets provide an overview of what we heard from residents of Deering, Buckland, Noatak, and Kotzebue during our public meetings in those villages.

- There was broad agreement that there are many fewer beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound at present than there were historically.
- Many hunters stated a desire to increase the numbers of beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound so their village could continue to hunt beluga whales for the long term.
- Some hunters at each public meeting were unaware of the importance of getting tissue samples for genetics analysis. Many hunters expressed interest in providing tissue samples, now that they understood the importance of such samples. The samples can help determine whether harvested animals came from a local beluga population unique to Kotzebue Sound or from another recognized population of beluga whales.
- Hunters suggested taking steps to increase outreach to all hunters, explaining why the tissue samples and genetics are useful.
- Some hunters were unclear about what type of tissue sample should be provided for genetic analysis (tissue samples should be muscle or skin, not blubber). Hunters also suggested that additional outreach to hunters would help inform them what to collect.
- Hunters and others discussed a variety of ways to improve the number of tissue samples provided for genetics analysis, including:

    - Advertisements and announcements on Facebook, KOTZ radio, local newspapers, posters, and social media;

    - Posters placed in public locations (IRA buildings, post offices, schools, stores);
    - Include the topic in cultural camps to reach young hunters;
    - Information sharing on social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.).
    - Hunters need to know what the samples are for (the "big picture" not "we need this for genetics");
    - Hunters need to know how to preserve and where to bring the samples;
    - Provide incentives for providing tissue samples (rewards);
    - Provide results of the genetics/science from collected samples to the communities (not just the ABWC); and
    - Promote the importance of collecting samples by describing what is happening to Kotzebue Sound belugas whales.
- Hunters are concerned about how noise could change beluga whale distribution and impact subsistence harvests.
- Hunters are concerned about an increase in killer whale presence and how that could impact subsistence harvests.
- Hunters are curious about whether the 1984/85 entrapment of thousands of beluga whales in sea ice in Russia could have caused the decline in Kotzebue Sound.

In summary, our NMFS group believes that we had successful and productive visits to Kotzebue Sound villages to share and discuss issues that are important to local communities, subsistence harvests, and long-term conservation. We look forward to discussing with the ABWC these and other issues at the ABWC's meeting in November 2024.

Sincerely,

John L. Bengtson, Ph.D.
Director
Marine Mammal Laboratory

cc:

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Kivalina ABWC Representative, Jerry Norton, Jr.	tribeadmin@kivalina.org
Kivalina IRA Council President, Enoch Adams, Jr.	tribeadmin@kivalina.org
Kotzebue ABWC Representative, Cyrus Harris	charris@maniilaq.org
Kotzebue IRA Council Chair, Maqik Toni Raye Bergan	toni.bergen@qira.org
Noatak ABWC Representative, Thurston Booth	hilda.booth@maniilaq.org
Noatak IRA Council Chairman, Justin Gray Hawk, Sr.	tribeadmin@nautaaq.org
Robyn Angliss, MML Cetacean Assessment & Ecology Program Leader	robyn.angliss@noaa.gov
John Citta, North Slope Borough Dept. of Wildlife Management	john.citta@north-slope.org

Is there a separate population of beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound, Alaska?

Background and listening session

Kivalina
Deering
Buckland
Noatak
Kotzebue

August 19-23, 2024

last updated 8/7/2024

Introductions

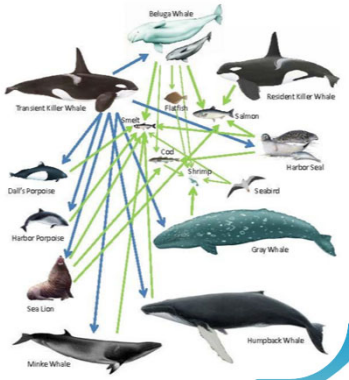
Anne Marie Eich

John Bengtson

Barbara Mahoney

Robyn Angliss

Beluga whales are an important subsistence resource and they are important to the ecosystem



A critical subsistence resource

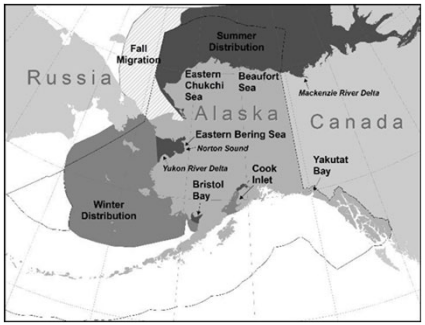
Archeological evidence of beluga hunting in Kotzebue Sound for at least 2,800 years

Photo courtesy of the ABWC

Five recognized stocks of Alaska beluga whales

Stock name	Estimated abundance
Beaufort Sea	39,258
Eastern Chukchi Sea	13,305
Eastern Bering Sea	12,269
Bristol Bay	2,040
Cook Inlet	279

Data from the final **2022** Stock Assessment Report



Summering areas are dark gray, wintering areas are lighter gray, and the hashed area is a region used by the Eastern Chukchi Sea and Beaufort Sea stocks for autumn migration.

Five recognized stocks of Alaska beluga whales

Stock name	Estimated abundance
Beaufort Sea	39,258
Eastern Chukchi Sea	13,305
Eastern Bering Sea	12,269
Bristol Bay	2,040
Cook Inlet	279

Data from the final **2022** Stock Assessment Reports

History of beluga in Kotzebue Sound, Part 1

Before 1985	After 1985
Many beluga in Kotzebue Sound • 1962: 900-1,200 beluga • 1978: 900-1,000 beluga • Substantial, consistent numbers of beluga in Kotzebue Sound every year	Fewer beluga in Kotzebue Sound every year • 1987: 51 beluga seen during an aerial survey • 1996: 13 beluga seen during an aerial survey, but a harvest of 75 beluga indicated that were more in the Sound • In 1996 and 2007, large numbers of beluga swam into Kotzebue Sound twice (1996 and 2007) and were genetically identified as Beaufort Sea beluga

History of beluga in Kotzebue Sound, Part 2

Before 1985	After 1985
Supported a harvest of 50-240 beluga per year • Beluga harvest conducted by five villages in Kotzebue Sound	Beluga whales are no longer common in Kotzebue Sound and usually a few beluga, 0-40/year (average 11/ year), are harvested annually with the exception of 1996 (75) and 2007 (151)
Genetics shows that beluga harvested in Kotzebue Sound before 1985 were very different from other beluga in Alaska → **unique population**!	Currently, there is limited genetic information on Kotzebue Sound beluga because few samples are collected each year

Recommendation to NMFS from the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee: Background

The ABWC recognized that beluga whales were once abundant in Kotzebue Sound until the early 1980s, have declined since then, and now belugas are rarely seen.

The ABWC worked with beluga hunters in Kotzebue Sound to discuss what could be done to bring Kotzebue beluga back to their former abundance and ensure that beluga would be available for hunting by future generations.

In 2016, the Kotzebue Sound Beluga Plan was finalized, and this Plan was adopted by all Kotzebue Sound Tribal Councils in 2020.

In 2022, after the O'Corry-Crowe et al 2022 genetics paper was published, the ABWC recommended that NMFS officially designate Kotzebue Sound beluga as a separate stock.

ABWC meets to discuss Kotzebue Sound beluga in 2018

How does NMFS decide whether to designate a new stock?

STEP 1: NMFS, with ABWC collaboration, summarizes information to evaluate whether there is a separate Demographically Independent Population.

STEP 2: NMFS, with ABWC collaboration, reviews this summarized information and decides whether to designate a new management unit, or stock.

STEP 3: If the data indicate there is a separate Demographically Independent Population and NMFS decides to designate a stock, NMFS would engage with the ABWC in a co-management context to identify next steps.

STEP 1: NMFS, with ABWC collaboration, summaries information to evaluate whether there is a separate Demographically Independent Population

Lines of evidence for a Demographically Independent Population that can be used - bright blue text shows the evidence used in our evaluation of Kotzebue Sound belugas:

- **Indigenous Knowledge on behavior, distribution, harvest, and movements***
- Contaminants
- **Distribution**
- **Genetics**
- Morphology
- **Movements**
- Acoustics
- Density
- Habitat
- Life History
- Trends
- Stable isotopes and fatty acids

***This is the first time that NMFS used Indigenous Knowledge to help understand whether a population of animals should be considered a Demographically Independent Population**

Key evidence: Indigenous Knowledge

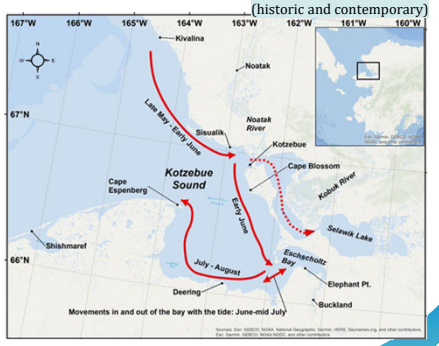
Supports existence of a separate DIP in Kotzebue Sound (historic and contemporary)

Multiple sources

- Peer reviewed papers that report Indigenous Knowledge as provided to the authors
- Communications directly with the ABWC in letters to NMFS, in newsletters, and in comments on sections of the draft report

Historical period (to 1985)

- Kotzebue beluga arrived in the spring in late May/early June;
- Beluga groups included calves
- Beluga were hunted in various places that no longer support a drive hunt (e.g., Sisualik, Kobuk Lake, Selawik River, and Eschscholtz Bay)



Key evidence: Harvest and sightings

Supports existence of a separate DIP in Kotzebue Sound (Historical)

Historical period (up to 1985)

- Clear evidence that a Kotzebue Sound Demographically Independent Population existed based on behavior, calf presence, distribution, location of drive hunts, and timing of arrival

Contemporary period (1985 and later)

- Unclear whether a Kotzebue Sound Demographically Independent Population exists based on behavior, calf presence, distribution, location of drive hunts, and timing of arrival

Key evidence: Genetics

Historical evidence supports existence of a separate DIP in Kotzebue Sound

Historical period (up to 1985)

- Clear evidence that a Kotzebue Sound DIP existed based on mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) from samples. Old samples could not be analyzed for nuclear DNA (nDNA).

Contemporary period (1985 and later)

- Evidence is ambiguous that a Kotzebue Sound beluga DIP exists based on mtDNA and nDNA samples.


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Genetic history and stock identity of beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound

Polar Research

O'Corry-Crowe et al 2001

What the "lines of evidence" indicate

Historical period (up to 1985)

- Indigenous Knowledge: a Kotzebue Sound Demographically Independent Population existed in the past
- Harvest/sightings/genetics: Demographically Independent Population existed in the past

Contemporary period (1985 to the present)

- Indigenous Knowledge: a Kotzebue Sound Demographically Independent Population still exists today
- Harvest/sightings/genetics: evidence for a Demographically Independent Population is ambiguous

NMFS has not yet made a formal determination on whether or not a Demographically Independent Population currently exists

STEP 2: If NMFS concludes that Kotzebue Sound belugas are a Demographically Independent Population, NMFS will evaluate whether they should be designated as a separate stock

A stock is a management unit.

- If NMFS designates a separate stock, NMFS will draft a summary with all available information about the stock, including:
  - Abundance
  - Distribution
  - Harvest
  - Human activities impacting the stock
  - Movements
- This draft summary will be shared with the ABWC prior to release, and made available for public comment


BELUGA WHALE (*Delphinapterus leucas*): Beaufort Sea Stock

STEP 3: If beluga in Kotzebue Sound are a Demographically Independent Population and NMFS designates a stock, NMFS will engage with ABWC in a co-management context

- Should harvest monitoring change, and if so, how?
- What new research would be needed to understand Kotzebue beluga?
  - Abundance
  - Distribution
  - Habitat
  - Movements
  - Prey
  - Trends
- How should the research be prioritized?

If beluga in Kotzebue Sound are not a DIP or not designated a stock, NMFS would continue to engage with the ABWC about harvest monitoring and priority research needs for beluga in this important summering area.

MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

19 December 2023

Ms. Anne Marie Eich
Assistant Regional Administrator for Protected Resources
Protected Resources Division
Alaska Regional Office
National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
709 West 9th Street, Room 420
Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

Dr. Robyn Angliss
Cetacean Assessment and Ecology Program Leader
Marine Mammal Laboratory
Alaska Fisheries Science Center
NMFS/NOAA
7600 Sand Point Way Northeast
Seattle, Washington 98115

Dear Anne Marie and Robyn:

The Marine Mammal Commission, in consultation with its Committee of Scientific Advisors on Marine Mammals, has reviewed the draft report from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Marine Mammal Laboratory entitled "Evaluation of Kotzebue Sound beluga whales as a proposed demographically independent population." That document was made available for review at the December meeting of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee (ABWC).

First, the Commission would like to commend NMFS for preparing the draft report and providing it for review by the ABWC at its December meeting, and for providing a courtesy copy to Commission staff for concurrent review. The draft report was comprehensive in its summary of multiple lines of evidence to support a designation of beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound as a demographically independent population (DIP), including: Indigenous Knowledge regarding historical and recent harvest numbers and sightings of beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound; genetic analyses of tissue and other biological samples; aerial survey and passive acoustic sampling data; and satellite telemetry data. Based on the information provided in the draft, the Commission believes there is strong evidence to support a determination that a demographically independent population of beluga whales occurred historically in Kotzebue Sound.

However, as noted by the ABWC, it is less clear which beluga stocks now occur in Kotzebue Sound, and more importantly, whether the historical stock of Kotzebue Sound belugas is still present and subject to harvest by hunters from villages in the Kotzebue Sound region[1]. A genetic analysis of a small number of tissue samples obtained from subsistence-harvested beluga whales in

[1] Including the Native villages of Kivalina, Noatak, Kotzebue, Buckland, and Deering.

Kotzebue Sound in recent years was inconclusive, but suggested the continued presence of Kotzebue Sound belugas as well as one other stock of beluga whales (presumably the Beaufort Sea stock), both subject to harvest in Kotzebue Sound (O'Corry-Crowe et al. 2021). Substantial efforts have been made by members of the beluga hunting villages in the Kotzebue Sound region to develop a Tribal Kotzebue Sound Beluga Plan to limit the continued harvest of any remnant population of Kotzebue Sound beluga whales. That Plan, which has been signed by all five Tribal villages in the Kotzebue Sound region, includes the following guidance to hunters (among other provisions, as identified in ABWC (2023)):

- Avoid harvest of females, especially females with calves and young (gray) whales.
- Avoid harvest of whales from June to mid-July, when the Kotzebue Sound whales are likely to be present.
- Avoid the use of nets to harvest whales, which is more likely than other harvesting methods to catch females and calves unintentionally.
- Avoid harvest of whales from designated "safe zones" (currently identified as Selawik Lake, Kobuk Lake, Goodhope Bay, Kiwalik Lagoon, and Eschscholtz Bay).
- Encourage hunters to collect and submit genetic tissue samples (skin) from harvested whales, noting the color and sex of the whale and the date and location of the harvest.
- Designate a person in each village to record and report local sightings of beluga whales (and also killer whales, which are known to prey on beluga whales).

Unfortunately, as was discussed at the December ABWC meeting and previous meetings, there is concern that the Plan is not being followed by some of the hunters and few tissue samples are currently being collected from harvested whales. The possibility of continued harvest from an extant remnant population of Kotzebue Sound beluga whales raises the likelihood that the population, if still viable, could be extirpated by continued harvesting. This hunting pressure comes in the context of other stressors on the beluga whale population, such as predation by killer whales, access to shifting or declining prey resources related to climate change, and disturbance from sound-generating human activities.

Given the possibility that some whales from the Kotzebue Sound population remain, it is imperative that NMFS moves quickly and uses the information in the draft DIP report to designate the Kotzebue Sound population as a DIP. Ultimately, this population should be recognized as a stock under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, separate and distinct from the five other beluga whale stocks that occur in Alaska[2]. The designation of the Kotzebue Sound population as a separate stock would raise awareness amongst hunters and potentially allow resources to be prioritized by NMFS, ABWC, the beluga hunting villages, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the North Slope Borough, and stakeholders to emphasize and accelerate data collection, research, and conservation actions to prevent extirpation of the stock.

The Commission recommends that the NMFS Alaska Regional Office act quickly, in coordination with the NMFS Marine Mammal Laboratory, ABWC, and beluga hunting villages in

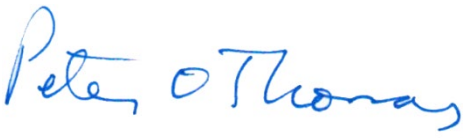
[2] Including beluga whale stocks in Cook Inlet, Bristol Bay, Eastern Bering Sea, Eastern Chukchi Sea, and Beaufort Sea (Young et al. 2023).

the region, to designate the Kotzebue Sound population as a separate stock of beluga whales under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. That action should be taken in consultation with Tribal Councils from each of the five Kotzebue Sound beluga hunting villages, in accordance with the government-to-government consultation provisions outlined in Executive Order 13175 "Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments" and associated guidance documents.

The Commission also recommends that NMFS work closely with the ABWC, the beluga whale hunting villages in the Kotzebue Sound region, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the North Slope Borough, and other co-management partners and stakeholders, to (1) report on observations of beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound, (2) collect and analyze harvest data and tissue samples from all belugas harvested in Kotzebue Sound to continue to refine our understanding of beluga whale stocks there, and (3) encourage implementation of the conservation actions outlined in the Tribal Kotzebue Sound Beluga Plan. These actions would be facilitated by increased outreach and visits by NMFS staff to engage members of each of the Kotzebue Sound beluga hunting villages to underscore the importance of the stock designation and the conservation of a remaining Kotzebue Sound whale population. Swift implementation of these recommendations will ensure continued access to important subsistence resources for future generations of Alaska Natives.

Please let us know if the Commission can be of any help in furthering conservation efforts for beluga whales.

Sincerely,



Peter O. Thomas, Ph.D.
Executive Director

cc: Tom Gray, Chair, Alaska Beluga Whale Committee
Shannon Bettridge, NMFS Office of Protected Resources
Dr. Lori Quakenbush, Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Dr. John Citta, North Slope Borough

References

ABWC. 2023. Kotzebue Sound Beluga Newsletter: What's up with Kotzebue Sound belugas? July 2023. https://www.north-slope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/OTZ-Newsletter-July-2023.pdf

O'Corry-Crowe, G., T. Ferrer, J.J. Citta, R. Suydam, L. Quakenbush, J.J. Burns, J. Monroy, A. Whiting, G. Seaman, W. Goodwin, Sr., M. Meyer, S. Rodgers, and K.J. Frost. 2021. Genetic history and stock identity of beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound. Polar Research 40:7623. http://dx.doi.org/10.33265/polar.v40.7623

Young, N.C., A.A. Brower, M.M. Muto, J.C. Freed, R.P. Angliss, N.A. Friday, P.L. Boveng, B.M. Brost, M.F. Cameron, J.L. Crance, S.P. Dahle, B.S. Fadely, M.C. Ferguson, K.T. Goetz, J.M. London, E.M. Oleson, R.R. Ream, E.L. Richmond, K.E.W. Shelden, K.L. Sweeney, R.G. Towell, P.R. Wade, J.M. Waite, and A.N. Zerbini. 2023. Alaska marine mammal stock assessments, 2022. U.S. Department of Commerce, NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS-AFSC-474, 316 pages.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau, AK 99802-1668

April 15, 2024

Peter Thomas
Executive Director
U.S. Marine Mammal Commission
4340 East-West Hwy, Suite 700
Bethesda, MD 20814

Dear Dr. Thomas:

Thank you for your letter dated 19 December 2023 providing a compliment and recommendations about an early draft report shared with our co-management partner, the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee (ABWC), at their December 2023 meeting. The NMFS Alaska Fisheries Science Center circulated a portion of the draft report to the ABWC to ensure that the NMFS working group appropriately characterized the available Indigenous Knowledge (IK), and inquired if additional IK should be incorporated. Since staff from NMFS, ABWC, and the Marine Mammal Commission (MMC) were all at the meeting, NMFS provided a courtesy copy to MMC staff. NMFS did not expect that MMC would provide formal recommendations at this early stage in the process, before the draft report was more developed.

The MMC recommended that NMFS act quickly to designate Kotzebue Sound belugas as a separate stock under the MMPA. The draft report summarized lines of evidence that evaluated if a demographically independent population (DIP) of beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound are present. A DIP evaluation precedes the management decision to designate, or not, a marine mammal stock. NMFS understands your interest in this matter and is proceeding with deliberations following the process laid out in *Reviewing and Designating Stocks and Issuing Stock Assessment Reports under the Marine Mammal Protection Act* (NMFS PD 02-204-03) as quickly as feasible given the complexity of the DIP question. We are committed to working with our co-management partners and have been coordinating and cooperating with them early in this process. As it relates to evaluating the DIP, we welcome the MMC's input at the time of engagement with the Alaska Scientific Review Group on this issue (Step 6 in NMFS PD 02-204-03), which is currently planned for summer 2024.

The MMC also recommended that NMFS work with the ABWC on a variety of actions, including: 1) reporting observations of beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound, 2) collecting and analyzing harvest data and tissue samples from belugas harvested in Kotzebue Sound, and 3) encouraging implementation of the Kotzebue Sound Beluga Plan. NMFS has openly supported the Kotzebue Sound Beluga Plan, both verbally at multiple meetings and in writing, and we will continue to do so. NMFS agrees that outreach and science actions are important and will continue to collaborate with ABWC to pursue these actions as time and funding allows.

Thank you again for your letter. We look forward to continuing to engage with the MMC on beluga whales in Alaska, including those in Kotzebue Sound.

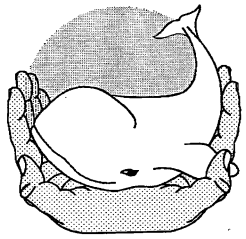
Sincerely,

Anne Marie Eich

Anne Marie Eich, Ph.D.
Assistant Regional Administrator
for Protected Resources
NMFS Alaska Regional Office

John Bengtson
Director, Marine Mammal Laboratory

Cc: Tom Gray, Chairman, Alaska Beluga Whale Committee
Kathy Frost, Secretary, Alaska Beluga Whale Committee
Robyn Angliss, NMFS Alaska Fisheries Science Center
Shannon Bettridge, NMFS Office of Protected Resources
John Citta, North Slope Borough
Lori Quakenbush, Alaska Department of Fish and Game



Alaska Beluga Whale Committee

c/o Kathy Frost, Secretary
73-4388 Paiaha Street
Kailua-Kona, HI 96740-9311 USA

25 May 2024

Dr. John Bengtson
National Marine Fisheries Service
Marine Mammal Laboratory
Seattle, WA 98115

Dear John,

Thank you for providing the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee (ABWC) a revised draft "Evaluation of whether there is a demographically independent population of beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound, AK" on 23 April 2024. The ABWC is pleased that the NMFS MML has concluded that:

- A Kotzebue Sound DIP existed -- based on Indigenous Knowledge, Harvest/Sightings, and Genetics lines of evidence.
- A Kotzebue Sound DIP exists at present -- based on Indigenous Knowledge. The Harvest/Sightings and Genetics lines of evidence are ambiguous. Acoustics and Satellite Tagging are not informative for evaluating the existence of a DIP.

The ABWC has two primary concerns:

1) The document relies heavily on "Indigenous Knowledge." However, hunters in Kotzebue Sound, as with most beluga hunters, do not think about stock structure. As such, Indigenous Knowledge states that belugas traditionally enter the sound in June, but does not comment on there being a separate Kotzebue Stock. If beluga hunters were asked if the belugas they hunt in June are a separate stock, most would not know how to answer. In general, most hunters think all belugas in Alaska belong to one big group. Because of this, wording this document carefully is warranted. We suggest something to the effect that "**Indigenous Knowledge and the observations of hunters regarding the timing and distribution of belugas during historical and current times suggest that the Kotzebue Sound group of belugas is a unique stock and continues to exist.**"

Indigenous Knowledge does not explicitly comment on the stock structure of belugas in Kotzebue Sound. This is a subtle but important distinction.

2) The assessment would be more robust if conclusions were based on a "weight of evidence" approach which combined multiple information sources, including Indigenous Knowledge, subsistence harvest, sightings data, genetic data, passive acoustic monitoring,

and satellite tagging data. Currently, the entire assessment is based upon Indigenous Knowledge and discounts all other lines of evidence. As examples:

Satellite tag data are discounted as "not useful." It would be more informative to state that while sample sizes are small, none of the available satellite tag data indicate that other known stocks use Kotzebue Sound. If we saw belugas from the known stocks using Kotzebue Sound, that would give us pause.

Acoustic data were not considered useful because some belugas were detected in May (prior to when hunters used to see belugas). It would be more useful to state that belugas were detected May-July, which overlaps when belugas were traditionally hunted in June and early July. With changing weather and earlier ice breakup, it is not surprising that belugas are detected earlier in the spring. If no belugas were detected acoustically in May or June, that would give us pause.

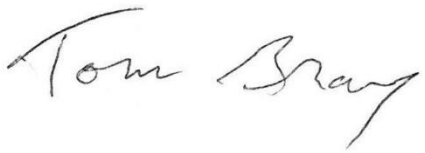
Genetic data were considered "inconclusive." In fact, genetic data clearly indicate that historically there was a Kotzebue Sound stock. Contemporary sampling does not rule out the possibility that this stock still exists. While unique haplotypes could be from an under-sampled Beaufort Sea stock, they may also be from the historic stock. There is no reason to discount the continued existence of the historical Kotzebue Sound stock because unique haplotypes have been identified.

We suggest recasting this section to highlight what the weight of evidence indicates.

The ABWC finds it difficult to understand why NMFS distinguishes between a DIP determination before the decline in the 1980s and a separate DIP determination since then. If belugas have been regularly seen (by both hunters and scientists) in Kotzebue Sound in most years since the 1980s decline (even if they were very rare in some years and some had unusually high numbers that included whales from other stocks) the most likely interpretation (even without corroborating genetic data) is that they are the original Kotzebue Sound belugas whales, especially given the strong tendencies of belugas to return to the same area year after year.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide NMFS with comments about the draft DIP document. I have attached a marked copy of the draft document with the ABWC's comments and/or suggested changes. Let us know if you have any questions or need clarification.

Sincerely,



Tom Gray, Chairman
Alaska Beluga Whale Committee

cc: Robyn Angliss, NMFS, Alaska Fisheries Science Center
Kim Sheldon, NMFS, Alaska Fisheries Science Center
Robert Foy, NMFS, Alaska Fisheries Science Center

Anne Marie Eich, NMFS, Alaska Region
Barbara Mahoney, NMFS, Alaska Region
Jon Kurland, NMFS, Alaska Region
Sue Moore, US Marine Mammal Commission
Vicki Cornish, US Marine Mammal Commission

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
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Marine Mammal Laboratory
7600 Sand Point Way N.E.
Seattle, Washington 98115
Tel: 206.526.4016
E-mail: john.bengtson@noaa.gov

23 April 2024

Mr. Tom Gray, Chairman
Alaska Beluga Whale Committee
P.O. Box 306
Nome, AK 99762

Dear Tom:

Thank you and the other members of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee (ABWC) for your interest in NMFS' evaluation of designating beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound as a potential stock under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). As you know, there are many steps in this process. The first step is to summarize and evaluate the best available information as to whether beluga whales that use Kotzebue Sound represent a Demographically Independent Population (DIP). We provided the ABWC with a draft report of the available Indigenous Knowledge and science that we used for this evaluation at the ABWC meeting in December 2023, and we appreciated the review and feedback from the ABWC.

We are now providing an updated summary of the Indigenous Knowledge and science sections that will be in the final report, which have been informed by your previous review and input. Our synthesis and conclusions are:

- A Kotzebue Sound DIP existed -- based on Indigenous Knowledge, Harvest/Sightings, and Genetics lines of evidence.
- A Kotzebue Sound DIP exists at present -- based on Indigenous Knowledge. The Harvest/Sightings and Genetics lines of evidence are ambiguous. Acoustics and Satellite Tagging are not informative for evaluating the existence of a DIP.

While NMFS continues to work toward finalizing this report, we invite you to review the attached draft report to ensure we have adequately considered and addressed your comments. Please note we are sharing this draft report for your review as co-managers and ask that the ABWC does not distribute this document. Your review will be most helpful if it is received by 15 June.

We plan to finalize the Kotzebue Sound DIP evaluation report by the end of the summer.

We look forward to continuing to work with you and others in the ABWC to make progress on this important issue.

All the best,

Sincerely,

John L. Bengtson, Ph.D.
Director
Marine Mammal Laboratory

cc: DRAFT – Evaluation of whether there is a demographically independent population of beluga whales in Kotzebue Sound, AK

Kotzebue Sound beluga history

70s-83	High harvests.
1978-84	Harvest monitored, samples collected (teeth, stomachs, reproduction) by ADFG
1984	Eschscholtz Bay beluga harvest crashes.
1988	Aerial surveys of belugas in Kotzebue Sound (previously 1000, now less than 200) (ADFG). Nathan Hadley notes many fewer belugas.
1989	Nathan Hadley, Buckland, recommends beluga management plan. Concerned about increasing boat traffic and that hunters no longer leave Chamisso Island and Choris Peninsula alone to protect females with young.
1990	Nathan Hadley, Buckland, concerned about disturbance of beluga females with calves near Chamisso Island and Franky Scott's cabin. Now young hunters go where they should not.
1992	ABWC genetics study begins
1996	Ross Schaeffer, ABWC Chairman, and Willie Goodwin, Kotzebue ABWC delegate, said the Kotzebue hunters will hold meetings (and include other Kotzebue Sound beluga hunters) to make proposals about the hunt and to discuss values, respect, etc.
1996	Aerial surveys of Kotzebue Sound (ABWC), few belugas seen.
1998	Aerial surveys of Kotzebue Sound (ABWC), one beluga seen. Genetics samples needed.
2001	Aerial surveys of Kotzebue Sound (Willie Goodwin + Kivalina people with Cominco funds), few belugas seen.
2001-03	Enoch Shiedts and ABWC Chairman Ross Schaeffer propose Regional Beluga Plan for Kotzebue Sound. To include guidelines about methods, appropriate ways of hunting, avoid females with young, etc. Visited Kivalina, will go to Buckland, Noatak. The plan is to start a local Marine Mammal Committee in Kotzebue and make it so others can join at a later date. Buckland also wants to join. Progress very slow. Guidelines are needed for young people.
2002	O'Corry-Crowe scientific paper indicates Kotzebue Sound belugas are genetically distinct from belugas harvested at Point Lay.
2005-06	ABWC recommends Kotzebue Sound develop a regional management plan for belugas. Willie Goodwin encourages Maniilaq to help. If belugas come back, harvest must stay small so belugas can increase.
2006	Samples from Kotzebue Sound for genetics badly needed.
2007	First pilot beluga acoustic study Kotzebue Sound.
2008	Kotzebue Sound beluga newsletter (abundance, harvest, genetics, acoustics study), 600 copies.
2013-16	Beluga acoustics study in Kotzebue Sound (Castellote et al.)..

2013-15	The Buckland Beluga Whale Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) Project; included TEK interviews and Wisdom Keeper Workshop in Buckland (funded by Buckland IRA; Buckland plus scientists). Recommended regional management plan, with plan put together by hunters.
2016	Native Village of Buckland received Tribal Wildlife Grant from FWS to develop a youth education program and a Kotzebue Sound Beluga Management Plan. Meetings (Buckland, Deering, Kivalina, Kotzebue, Noatak).
2016	Kotzebue Sound Wisdom Keeper Workshop (provide beluga information, develop draft management plan). Buckland, Deering, Kivalina, Kotzebue, Noatak, scientists, ABWC.
2016-17	Noatak Beluga Whale Traditional Knowledge Project. Draft Kotzebue Sound Beluga Plan developed.
2017	Kotzebue Sound Workshop (ABWC funded). Revise draft plan. Buckland, Deering, Kivalina, Kotzebue, Noatak, scientists, ABWC.
	Kotzebue Sound beluga newsletter (draft plan, planning process, biology) – 600 copies mailed
2018	Kotzebue Sound Workshop. Finalize draft plan. The draft plan encourages no hunting in June or July, no hunting of females with calves, no use of nets, and no hunting in safe zones in Selawik and Kobuk lakes, Goodhope Bay, Kiwalik Lagoon, and Eschscholtz Bay. Genetics samples are badly needed to understand stock structure. Harvest highest since 2011.
2020	Kotzebue Sound beluga newsletter (draft plan, planning process, biology) – 225 copies mailed to TCs and Kotzebue Sound hunters.
	Bring Belugas Back poster to TCs, posted in Buckland, Deering, Kivalina, Kotzebue, Noatak.
2020-22	Resolutions to Adopt Tribal Beluga Management Plan signed by Buckland, Deering, Kivalina, Kotzebue, Noatak.
2021	Greg O'Corry-Crowe and ABWC publish scientific paper on status of Kotzebue Sound belugas as a separate stock.
2022	Native Village of Kotzebue declines ABWC plan to hold Beluga Plan implementation workshop prior to hunting season.

Proposed changes to BYLAWS
ALASKA BELUGA WHALE COMMITTEE

ARTICLE 1. NAME AND PURPOSE

Section 2. Purpose

The purpose of the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee is to:

D. Promote development and implementation of a management plan and regional management plans for beluga whales;

ARTICLE II. MEMBERSHIP

Section 1. Membership

B. Other members may be added by a vote of the Committee. This may include scientific members, emeritus members or other.

F. ABWC members are expected to attend all ABWC meetings, provide harvest information for their community, participate in discussions, and report back to their tribal council or regional organization about the meetings.

Section 4. Removal

A. Members will be removed for inappropriate behavior such as participating in ABWC business or meetings while impaired by drugs or alcohol; inappropriate behavior during or outside of ABWC meetings and/or while traveling as a representative of the ABWC; and unexcused absences from ABWC meetings. Members are responsible for their hotel guests who share ABWC-provided accommodations.

~~A.~~B. The Executive Committee will notify the respective tribal council or regional organization about a member's removal and seek a new representative. The duration a violator cannot attend meetings is at the discretion of the ABWC Executive Committee.

ARTICLE III. OFFICERS

Section 6. Hearing Committee

The ABWC Hearing Committee shall consist of the ABWC Executive Committee and appropriate regional and hunter representatives as determined by the Executive Committee. The Hearing Committee will hold special hearings, as necessary, to a) determine response to infractions of the AWBC attendance policy and b) resolve any infraactions of the ABWC Management Plan that cannot be resolved at a local or regional level. A majority vote of the members of the Hearing Committee shall be required for action. The minutes from any special hearing by this committee must be made available to the full ABWC unless there is a compelling reason not to do so.