

Motion to propose Kotzebue Sound belugas as a Demographically Independent Population (DIP) and separate and unique stock

Background

- Belugas have been present in Kotzebue Sound and hunted by residents of the region for many generations.
- Community or drive hunts were especially important in Eschscholtz Bay, particularly for the village of Buckland.
- Hunts in Eschscholtz Bay were quite large in the late 1970s and early 1980s but belugas had mostly disappeared from that bay by the mid-1980s and drive hunts were no longer possible.
- Because of this and other information, the ABWC has had conservation concerns about belugas in this area for many years.
- Buckland residents were worried that their young people were not learning about belugas and beluga hunting and therefore initiated a program to document traditional knowledge and promote conservation.
- Through the lead of Buckland and with support from the ABWC, the beluga hunting villages of Kotzebue Sound drafted, and the Tribal Councils approved, a management plan that had provisions for reducing the harvest of belugas so their numbers could increase although those provisions have not been completely implemented.
- The National Marine Fisheries Service informed the ABWC that Kotzebue Sound belugas had to be designated a Demographically Independent Population (DIP) before they could be designated a stock. The NMFS AFSC has completed an assessment of Kotzebue Sound belugas as a DIP. They agreed that data available before the ~mid-1980s demonstrated that Kotzebue belugas were a unique stock but more recent data suggest that in some years belugas from other stocks may also be in Kotzebue Sound.
- Recent information shows that belugas have continued to annually occur in Kotzebue Sound since the mid-1980s suggesting that the original group of Kotzebue belugas continues to occupy the sound during the summer.
- Designating Kotzebue Sound belugas as a DIP and stock will help raise

awareness about the status of those belugas with the possibility of recovering or at least increasing the number of Kotzebue Sound belugas.

Motion

Therefore, because (1) the best available and most recent science and Indigenous Knowledge recognize Kotzebue Sound belugas as a separate and distinct group of animals and (2) the beluga hunting villages of Kotzebue Sound have drafted and agreed to a regional management plan to help recover belugas in this area, I move that the ABWC recognizes Kotzebue Sound belugas as a DIP and a stock, and strongly encourages the NMFS to do so also.

This motion passed on 17 December 2025 with 22 “yes”, 0 “no”, and 6 “abstained”. Two of the abstentions included employees of the National Marine Fisheries Service which did not vote as they are the agency reviewing DIP and stock designations.