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State Objects to Critical Habitat for Beluga Whales

March 3, 2010, Juneau, Alaska – The State of Alaska filed comments with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration today objecting to a proposal to designate more than one-third of Cook Inlet as critical habitat for beluga whales.

The proposed areas of critical habitat cover all of Anchorage and Mat-Su Borough's tidal waters and extend down Cook Inlet past the City of Kenai. The habitat also includes parts of Kachemak Bay near Homer and areas across the inlet from the Kenai Peninsula.

"While we understand the need to protect critical habitat important to beluga whales in Cook Inlet, I have concluded that designating critical habitat is premature at this time," said Governor Parnell today. "The current proposal has the high potential of needlessly delaying or stopping otherwise responsible development projects throughout Cook Inlet without adequate justification".

"Our primary concerns with the analysis is the lack of specificity in the proposed habitat elements identified by NMFS as important for beluga conservation and recovery and a failure to provide a more discrete analysis of the actual areas within the Inlet that contain these elements," said Doug Vincent-Lang, the State's Endangered Species Act Coordinator.

"We also have serious concerns with the methodology used to estimate the cost of the proposed designation. The economic analysis grossly underestimates the true costs of the listing, making it impossible to determine whether certain areas should be considered for economic exclusion as required by law," added Doug Vincent-Lang.

"Given the magnitude of the State's concerns and the reality that an unnecessary, overly broad designation has the high potential of needlessly delaying or stopping otherwise responsible development projects, we request the NMFS revise its CHD proposal and provide an additional public comment period after the identified issues are addressed," concluded Governor Parnell.

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