



MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

28 June 2010

James W. Balsiger, Ph.D.
Director, Alaska Regional Office
National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau, Alaska 99802-1168

Douglas DeMaster, Ph.D.
Director, Alaska Fisheries Science Center
National Marine Fisheries Service
7600 Sand Point Way N.E., Building 4
Seattle, Washington 98115

Dear Dr. Balsiger and Dr. DeMaster:

Recovery of the Cook Inlet beluga whale population has been a matter of controversy since the late 1990s when the National Marine Fisheries Service was deliberating on whether to list the species under the Endangered Species Act or to designate it as depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Although subsistence harvesting was first reduced and then halted, the expected recovery has not occurred. The population remains at risk from natural and anthropogenic factors and has been at the center of several controversies involving development activities in Cook Inlet.

During much of the last decade, funding for Cook Inlet beluga research and recovery appears to have been dedicated only to basic tasks, such as annual surveys. The Commission understands that this funding has recently been increased, but it is not clear how much is going toward research and recovery tasks or specifically how those funds have been used. Given the species' precarious status, the Commission would like to know more about past, present, and future funding for its recovery. The Commission therefore requests that the Service provide a summary indicating (1) how much funding it allocated for Cook Inlet beluga whale research for fiscal years 2006 through 2010, (2) what research and recovery projects were or are being undertaken in each of those years and the approximate cost of each, (3) how other funds designated for Cook Inlet beluga recovery have been used, and (4) planned research and recovery activities and their costs for fiscal years 2011 to 2013. The Commission is aware that the Service has convened a recovery team to draft a Cook Inlet beluga whale recovery plan and that the team will be considering research needs and priorities. However, the final plan likely will not be completed and adopted for several years and, undoubtedly, the Service will commit resources toward research and recovery during the plan's development.

The Commission requests this information to ensure that it is fully informed about actions that are being taken to conserve the Cook Inlet beluga population. Thank you in advance for providing this information. Please contact me if you or your staff has questions about this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Timothy J. Ragen".

Timothy J. Ragen, Ph.D.
Executive Director

Cc: John L Bengtson, Ph.D.
Ms. Kaja Brix
Tamara McGuire, Ph.D.