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

NOTE – April 2022: NMFS is evaluating whether scientific issues raised by co-management partners in November 2021 concerning the Eastern Bering Sea beluga whale Stock Assessment Report may also be applicable to the Beaufort Sea beluga whale Stock Assessment Report. Any resulting changes will be reflected in a future Stock Assessment Report.

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Beluga whales are distributed throughout seasonally ice-covered arctic and subarctic waters of the Northern Hemisphere (Gurevich 1980). In ice-covered regions, they are closely associated with open leads and polynyas (Hazard 1988). In Alaska, depending on season and region, beluga whales may occur in both offshore and coastal waters, with summer concentrations in upper Cook Inlet, Bristol Bay, eastern Bering Sea (i.e., Yukon River Delta, Norton Sound), eastern Chukchi Sea, and Beaufort Sea (Mackenzie River Delta) (Hazard 1988, O'Corry-Crowe et al. 2018) (Fig. 1). Seasonal distribution is affected by ice cover, tidal conditions, access to prey, temperature, and human interaction (Lowry 1985). Data from satellite transmitters attached to beluga whales from the Beaufort Sea, Eastern Chukchi Sea, Eastern Bering Sea, and Bristol Bay stocks identify ranges that are relatively distinct month to month for these stocks' summering areas and autumn migratory routes (e.g., Hauser et al. 2014, Citta et al. 2017, Lowry et al. 2019). Transmitters that lasted through the winter showed that beluga whales from these summering areas overwinter in the Bering Sea; these stocks are not known to overlap in space and time in the Bering Sea (Suydam 2009, Citta et al. 2017, Lowry et al. 2019).

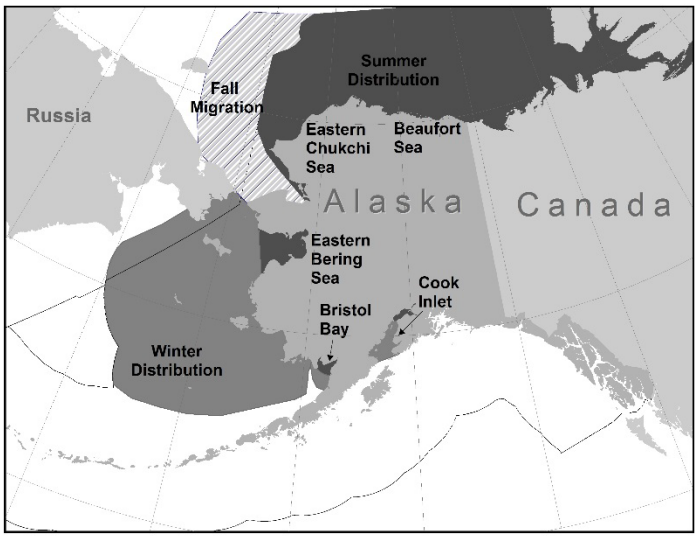

Figure 1. Approximate distribution for all five beluga whale stocks. The Beaufort Sea, Eastern Chukchi Sea, Eastern Bering Sea, and Bristol Bay beluga whale stocks summer in the Beaufort Sea (Beaufort Sea and Eastern Chukchi Sea stocks) and Bering Sea (Eastern Bering Sea and Bristol Bay stocks); they overwinter in the Bering Sea. The Bristol Bay and Cook Inlet beluga whale stocks show only small seasonal shifts in distribution, remaining in Bristol Bay and Cook Inlet, respectively, throughout the year. 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. The U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone is delineated by a black line.

New genetic analyses have further defined five of the summering aggregations in the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort seas as follows: Bristol Bay, eastern Bering Sea (Norton Sound), eastern Chukchi Sea (Kasegaluk Lagoon), eastern Beaufort Sea (Mackenzie-Amundsen), and Gulf of Anadyr (Anadyr Bay) (O'Corry-Crowe et al. 2018). These genetic analyses, combined with new telemetry data, demonstrate that the demographically distinct summering aggregations return to discrete wintering areas and disperse and interbreed over limited distances but do not appear to interbreed extensively (O'Corry-Crowe et al. 2018).

The Beaufort Sea and Eastern Chukchi Sea stocks of beluga whales migrate between the Bering and Beaufort seas. Beaufort Sea beluga whales depart the Bering Sea in early spring, migrate through the Chukchi Sea and into the Canadian waters of the Beaufort Sea where they remain in the summer and fall, returning to the Bering Sea in late fall. Eastern Chukchi Sea beluga whales depart the Bering Sea in late spring and early summer, migrate through the Chukchi Sea and into the western Beaufort Sea where they remain in the summer, returning to the Bering Sea in the fall. The Eastern Bering Sea beluga whale stock remains in the Bering Sea but migrates south

near Bristol Bay in winter and returns north to Norton Sound and the mouth of the Yukon River in summer (Suydam 2009, Hauser et al. 2014, Citta et al. 2017, Lowry et al. 2019). Beluga whales tagged in Bristol Bay (Quakenbush 2003; Citta et al. 2016, 2017) and Cook Inlet (Goetz et al. 2012; Shelden et al. 2015, 2018; Lowry et al. 2019) remain in those areas throughout the year, showing only small seasonal shifts in distribution.

The following information was considered in classifying beluga whale stock structure based on the Dizon et al. (1992) phylogeographic approach: 1) Distributional data: geographic distribution discontinuous in summer (Frost and Lowry 1990); 2) Population response data: distinct population trends among regions occupied in summering areas (O'Corry-Crowe et al. 2018); 3) Phenotypic data: unknown; and 4) Genotypic data: mitochondrial DNA analyses indicate distinct differences among the five summering areas (O'Corry-Crowe et al. 2018). Based on this information, five beluga whale stocks are recognized within U.S. waters: 1) Cook Inlet, 2) Bristol Bay, 3) Eastern Bering Sea, 4) Eastern Chukchi Sea, and 5) Beaufort Sea (Fig. 1).

POPULATION SIZE

The sources of information to estimate abundance for beluga whales in waters of northern Alaska and western Canada have included both opportunistic and systematic observations. Duval (1993) reported an estimate of 21,000 beluga whales for the Beaufort Sea stock, similar to that reported by Seaman et al. (1985). The most recent aerial survey conducted in July 1992 resulted in an estimate of 19,629 beluga whales (CV = 0.229) in the eastern Beaufort Sea (Harwood et al. 1996). To account for availability bias, a correction factor (CF), which was not data-based, has been recommended for the Beaufort Sea beluga whale stock (Duval 1993), resulting in a population estimate of 39,258 whales (19,629 × 2). A coefficient of variation (CV) for the CF is not available; however, this CF was considered negatively biased by the Alaska Scientific Review Group (SRG) considering that aerial survey CFs for this stock were estimated between 2.5 and 3.27 (Frost and Lowry 1995). Additionally, the 1992 surveys did not encompass the entire summer range of Beaufort Sea beluga whales (Richard et al. 2001), thus, are negatively biased.

During summer 2019, the governments of the United States and Canada supported independent aerial line-transect surveys in the eastern Beaufort Sea to conduct an abundance survey for bowhead whales. Those data are also being analyzed to derive abundance estimates for the Beaufort Sea stock of beluga whales.

Minimum Population Estimate

For the Beaufort Sea beluga whale stock, the minimum population estimate (N_{MIN}) is calculated according to Equation 1 from the potential biological removal (PBR) guidelines (NMFS 2016): $N_{MIN} = N/\exp(0.842\times[\ln(1+[CV(N)]^2)]^{½})$. Using the population estimate (N) of 39,258 whales and an associated CV(N) of 0.229, N_{MIN} for this stock would be 32,453 whales. However, because the survey data are more than 8 years old, it is not considered a reliable minimum population estimate for calculating a PBR and N_{MIN} is considered unknown.

Current Population Trend

The current population trend of the Beaufort Sea stock of beluga whales is unknown. Aerial surveys seaward of the Mackenzie River Delta between 1982-1985 and 2007-2009 indicate that the stock in that area is at least stable or increasing (Harwood and Kingsley 2013).

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

A reliable estimate of the maximum net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) is not available for the Beaufort Sea beluga whale stock. Until additional data become available, the default cetacean maximum theoretical net productivity rate of 4% will be used for this stock (NMFS 2016).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

PBR is defined as the product of the minimum population estimate, one-half the maximum theoretical net productivity rate, and a recovery factor: $PBR = N_{MIN} \times 0.5R_{MAX} \times F_R$. The recovery factor ($F_R$) for this stock is 1.0, a value that may be used for stocks that are not known to be decreasing and are taken primarily by aboriginal subsistence hunters, provided there have not been recent increases in the levels of takes (NMFS 2016). However, the 2016 guidelines for preparing Stock Assessment Reports (NMFS 2016) state that abundance estimates older than 8 years should not be used to calculate PBR due to a decline in confidence in the reliability of an aged abundance estimate. Therefore, the PBR for this stock is considered undetermined.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Information for each human-caused mortality, serious injury, and non-serious injury reported for NMFS-managed Alaska marine mammals between 2014 and 2018 is listed, by marine mammal stock, in Young et al. (2020); however, only the mortality and serious injury data are included in the Stock Assessment Reports. The minimum estimated mean annual level of human-caused mortality and serious injury for Beaufort Sea beluga whales between 2014 and 2018 is 104 beluga whales: 29 in subsistence takes by Alaska Natives and 75 in subsistence takes by Canadian Inuvialuit.

Fisheries Information

Information for federally-managed and state-managed U.S. commercial fisheries in Alaska waters is available in Appendix 3 of the Alaska Stock Assessment Reports (observer coverage) and in the NMFS List of Fisheries (LOF) and the fact sheets linked to fishery names in the LOF (observer coverage and reported incidental takes of marine mammals: https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-protection-act-list-fisheries, accessed December 2020).

There were no reports of mortality or serious injury of this stock incidental to U.S. commercial fisheries or subsistence fisheries in Alaska between 2014 and 2018.

Alaska Native Subsistence/Harvest Information

NMFS signed an agreement with the Alaska Beluga Whale Committee (ABWC; 2000) to co-manage western Alaska beluga whale populations in the Bering Sea (including Bristol Bay), Chukchi Sea, and Beaufort Sea. This co-management agreement promotes full and equal participation by Alaska Natives in decisions affecting the subsistence management of beluga whales (to the maximum extent allowed by law) as a tool for conserving beluga whale populations in Alaska (https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/marine-mammal-protection/co-management-marine-mammals-alaska, accessed December 2020).

The subsistence take of Beaufort Sea beluga whales within U.S. waters is reported by the ABWC. The most recent Alaska Native subsistence harvest estimates for the Beaufort Sea beluga whale stock are provided in Table 1 (ABWC, unpubl. data, 2020). The annual subsistence take by Alaska Native hunters averaged 29 Beaufort Sea beluga whales landed between 2014 and 2018. It should be noted that beluga whales harvested at Utqiaġvik (formerly Barrow) in spring are assumed to be from the Beaufort Sea stock, while those harvested in summer are assumed to be from the Eastern Chukchi Sea stock.

Table 1. Summary of Beaufort Sea beluga whales landed by Alaska Native subsistence hunters between 2014 and 2018 (ABWC, unpubl. data, 2020). These are minimum estimates of the total number of beluga whales taken, because not all landed whales and struck and lost whales are consistently reported.

Year	Number landed	Number struck and lost	Total (landed + struck and lost)
2014	24	7	31
2015	43	1	44
2016	43	no data	43
2017	10	no data	10
2018	13	4	17
Mean annual number (landed + struck and lost)			29

Canadian Inuvialuit Subsistence/Harvest Information

The subsistence take of beluga whales within the Canadian waters of the Beaufort Sea is reported by the Fisheries Joint Management Committee (FJMC). The data are collected through on-site harvest monitoring conducted by the FJMC at Inuvialuit communities in the Mackenzie River Delta, Northwest Territories. The Canadian Inuvialuit subsistence harvest estimates for the Beaufort Sea beluga whale stock between 2014 and 2018 are provided in Table 2 (FJMC Beluga Monitor Program, FJMC, Inuvik, NT, Canada). Given these data, the annual subsistence take in Canada averaged 75 beluga whales between 2014 and 2018.

Thus, the estimated mean annual subsistence take of Beaufort Sea beluga whales in U.S. and Canadian waters between 2014 and 2018 is 104 whales (29 + 75).

Table 2. Summary of Beaufort Sea beluga whales harvested by Canadian Inuvialuit subsistence hunters between 2014 and 2018 (FJMC, unpubl. data). N/A indicates that data are not available.

Year	Number landed	Number struck and lost	Total (landed + struck and lost)
2014	104	2	106
2015*	75	1	76
2016	48	1	49
2017	66	N/A	66
2018	76	2	78
Mean annual number taken (landed + struck and lost)			75

*The number of beluga whales landed in 2015 was changed from 82 to 75 whales (resulting in a change in the total harvest from 83 to 76 whales) based on updated harvest information from the FJMC (FJMC, unpubl. data).

STATUS OF STOCK

No fishery-related mortality or serious injury has been reported for the Beaufort Sea stock of beluga whales between 2014 and 2018; therefore, the mean annual mortality and serious injury rate incidental to U.S. commercial fisheries can be considered insignificant and approaching a zero mortality and serious injury rate. The minimum estimated mean annual level of human-caused mortality and serious injury for this stock is 104 beluga whales. Beaufort Sea beluga whales are not designated as depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act or listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Therefore, the Beaufort Sea beluga whale stock is classified as a non-strategic stock. At this time, it is not possible to assess the status of this stock relative to its Optimum Sustainable Population.

There are key uncertainties in the assessment of the Beaufort Sea stock of beluga whales. The most recently analyzed surveys were conducted more than 8 years ago and did not cover the entire population; given the lack of information on population trend, the abundance estimates are not used to calculate an N_{MIN} and the PBR level is undetermined.

HABITAT CONCERNS

Evidence indicates that the arctic climate is changing rapidly and significantly, and one result of this change is a reduction in the extent and duration of sea ice in some regions (ACIA 2004, Johannessen et al. 2004). These changes are likely to affect marine mammal species in the Arctic. Ice-associated animals, such as the beluga whale, are sensitive to changes in arctic weather, sea-surface temperatures, and sea-ice extent, and the concomitant effect on prey availability. There are indications that decreases in seasonal sea ice have influenced beluga whale phenology; however, Beaufort Sea beluga whales did not show a statistically significant change in the timing of their southward migration in response to changes in sea ice (Hauser et al. 2017). An offshore shift in distribution of Beaufort Sea beluga whales between an earlier sample in 1982-1985 and a later sample in 2007-2009 was attributed either to increased habitat due to more open water or potential response to industrial activity (Harwood and Kingsley 2013). Decreases in seasonal sea ice may also increase the risk of killer whale predation (O'Corry-Crowe et al. 2016). There are insufficient data to make reliable predictions of the effects of arctic climate change on beluga whales; however, Laidre et al. (2008) and Heide-Jørgensen et al. (2010) concluded that on a worldwide basis beluga whales were likely to be less sensitive to climate change than other arctic cetaceans because of their wide distribution and flexible behavior. Increased human activity in the Arctic, including increased oil and gas exploration and development and increased nearshore development, has the potential to impact beluga whale habitat (Moore et al. 2000, Lowry et al. 2006). However, predicting the type and magnitude of these impacts is difficult.

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