

# Reporting Stranded Beluga Whales in Cook Inlet, Alaska



Photo credit Paul Wade, NOAA Fisheries



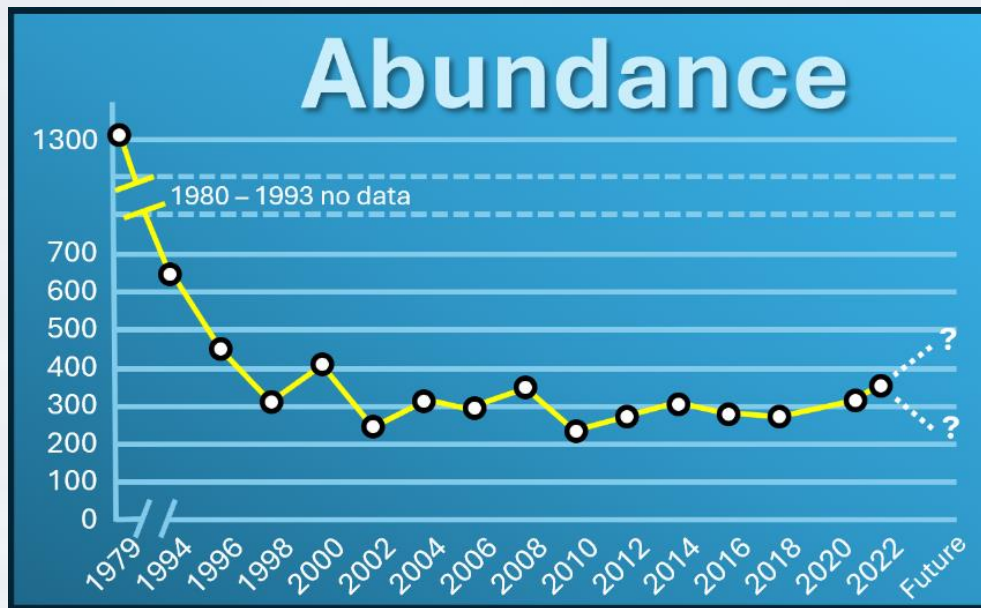
**NOAA**  
**FISHERIES**



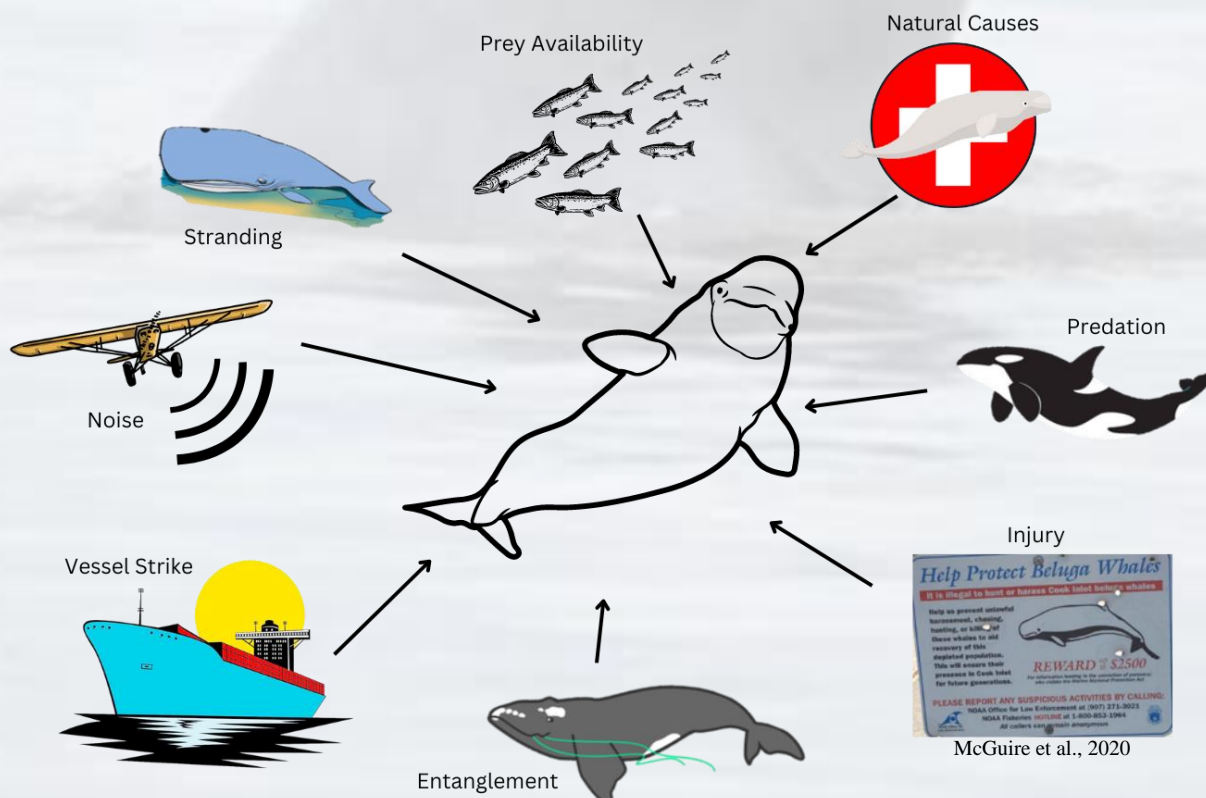
This training discusses the status, potential threats, and proper reporting for stranded Cook Inlet beluga whales. It was designed for local pilots flying in Cook Inlet. The training was created by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Funding was provided by the US Fish and Wildlife Service C-State Wildlife Grant and in-kind support was provided by the National Marine Fisheries Service.

# Who are the Cook Inlet Beluga?

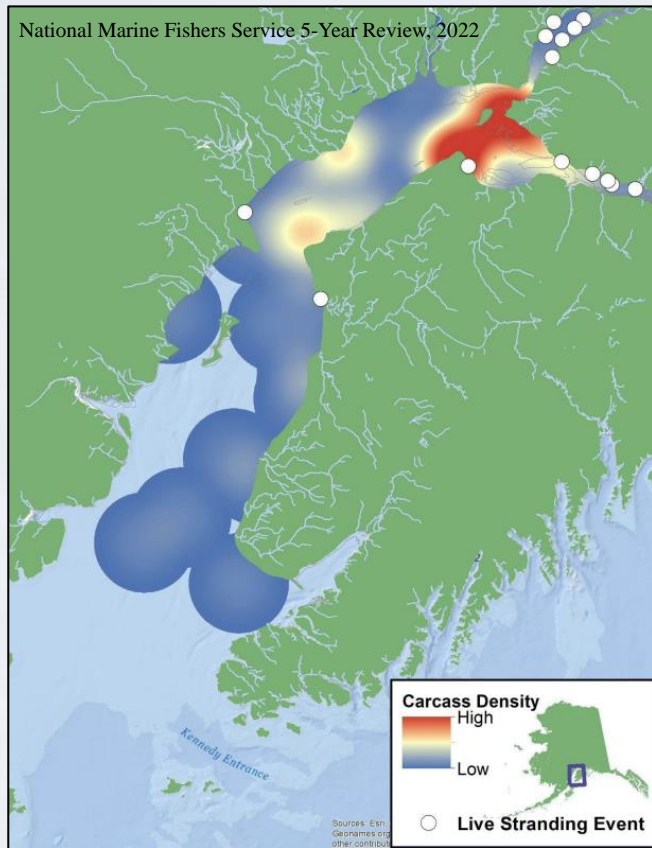
- Cook Inlet beluga (CIB) whales are a distinct population of belugas and live year-round in Cook Inlet, Alaska.
- The population crashed in the 1990's and remains around **350 individuals**.



- Researchers are trying to identify any **factors** that prevent their recovery.



# Stranded Animals and Research



Stranding locations of live (white circles) and dead (density coded) beluga, 2009-2021.

- A ‘**stranded**’ animal is one that has died or is at risk of dying. The Alaska Stranding Network relies on **public reports** of strandings to pinpoint which factors affect beluga survival.
- Deceased animals are autopsied to help researchers understand the health of the individual and determine its cause of death.
- Live animals may strand if tangled in gear, injured, sick, or trapped in shallow water. These animals need urgent help from **trained Network responders**.



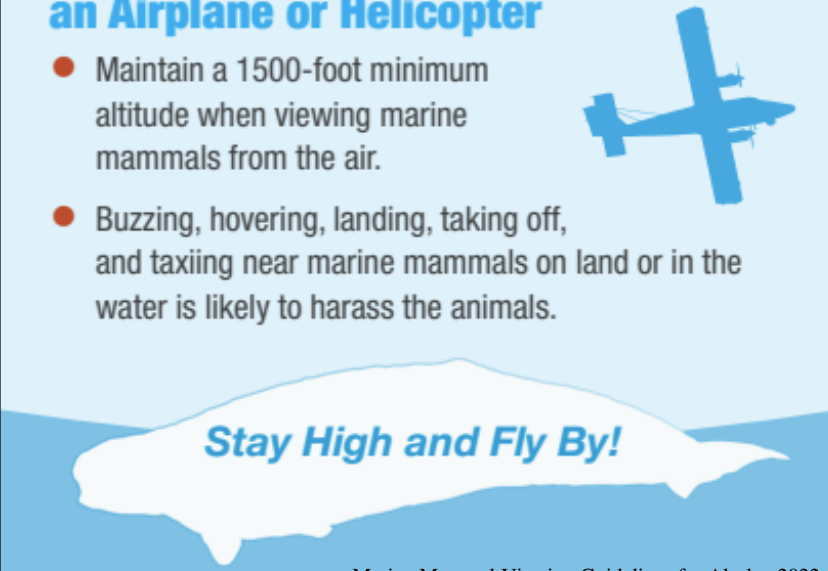
Mass Stranding Events happen when animals strand together.

# Do NOT Approach Live Animals

- Did you know it is **illegal** to fly within 1500 feet of **live** marine mammals? This law protects animals from stressful close approaches and loud noises.

### How to View Marine Mammals From an Airplane or Helicopter

- Maintain a 1500-foot minimum altitude when viewing marine mammals from the air.
- Buzzing, hovering, landing, taking off, and taxiing near marine mammals on land or in the water is likely to harass the animals.



*Stay High and Fly By!*

Marine Mammal Viewing Guidelines for Alaska, 2022

- The following are recommended if you encounter live marine mammals:
  - Do not circle, land next to, or touch the animal
  - Leave animal's area after 30 minutes
  - Do not operate drones (UAS) around animals
  - Do not approach within 100 yards from land or water

For dead or live stranded animals, contact the  
Stranding Network Hotline ASAP:



**877-925-7773**

# Information to Report

- You may be asked the following when reporting a stranding:
  - Date and time
  - Species/type of animal
  - Number of animals
  - Condition (live or dead)
  - Location, **GPS** if possible
  - Length and color
  - Descriptors such as white, pink, gray, yellow, skin sluffing, scavenged, or visible bones are helpful.
  - Contact info

**Never** put yourself or your property at risk to report a stranding.



**Tissues degrade quickly in Cook Inlet.** Prompt reporting of any stranded marine mammal is welcomed by the Stranding Network.



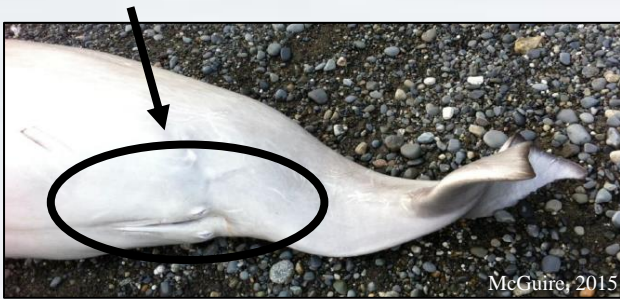
# A Picture is Worth 1,000 Words

Photos are **not required** to report a stranded animal, but these features can help identify individual belugas:

Entire animal



Abdomen to determine sex



An object for **scale** reference (such as this trekking pole)

Dorsal ridge and sides



**Do not** move the animal if a feature is not visible.

# What Could You Say?

## Animal A

Date and time: May 3, 2022. 09:30

Species/type of animal: Beluga

Number of animals: 1

Condition: Dead

Location: Pt Possession

Color: Gray-white

Size: Approx. 10 feet long

Description: severely decomposed with heavy scavenging and no organs remaining.

Photos taken: Yes

Access notes: Left of beach access point. Can walk there.

Contact Information: Alice Thomas, (907) 448-2927



Photo courtesy of National Marine Fisheries Service

# What Could You Say?

## Animal B

Date and time: April 18, 2023. 3:30pm

Species/type of animal: Beluga

Number of animals: 1

Condition: Dead

Location: 61.222276, -150.823221

Color: white

Size: Approximately 2 of my height, which is 6"3'

Description: Bird scavenging and pink, but not bloated

Photos taken: Yes

Access notes: Beach accessible by boat or chopper

Contact Information: Brian McManus,  
(907) 990-8144, McManus@ACC.com



Photo courtesy of National Marine Fisheries Service



# What Could You Say?

## Mass Stranding

Date and time: August 7, 2021. 14:45

Species/type of animal: Beluga

Number of animals: 20-30

Condition: Alive

Location: Near Goose Bay-Point Mackenzie Airport

Color: Dark gray, pink, and all white whales

Size: Ranging from 5-15 ft

Description: Most are dry or in small pools on the mudflat

Photos taken: Yes

Access notes: Location is approximate. Western Bank of the Knik Arm. Steep cliff access.

Contact Information: C/MSgt Elliot Tucker, (907) 577-2202



National Marine Fishers Service 5-Year Review, 2022

# Thank You, Pilots!

Stranding reports from the public help trained Network responders to reach animals quickly to provide help and collect data. We appreciate your participation and commitment to the Cook Inlet Belugas.

**24-hour Stranding Hotline:**

**877-925-7773**



Photo credit Paul Wade, NOAA Fisheries



Please follow the QR code below to take a **short quiz** on the Alaska Department of Fish and Game website.



The first 500 pilots who complete the quiz will receive a **free flight suit patch** to commemorate your training!

# Additional Resources

## Resources:

About beluga whales

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/beluga-whale>

NMFS Alaska Marine Mammal Viewing Guidelines and Regulations

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/marine-life-viewing-guidelines/alaska-marine-mammal-viewing-guidelines-and-regulations>

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/insight/viewing-marine-life>

Endangered, Threatened, and Candidate Species in Alaska

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/endangered-species-conservation/endangered-threatened-and-candidate-species-alaska>

Collecting Protected Species Parts

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/endangered-species-conservation/protected-species-parts>

Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Photo-ID Project

<https://www.cookinletbelugas.com/>

ADF&G Resources for reporting dead or distressed marine mammals

<https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=distressedwildlife.marinedistressed>

## Cited Material:

2009 Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Stranding Response Plan.

Beluga Whale: Cook Inlet DPS (*Delphinapterus leucas*). (2022). National Marine Fishers Service 5-Year Review: Summary and Evaluation.

McGuire, T. L., Stephens, A. D., McClung, J. R., Garner, C., Burek-Huntington, K. A., Goertz, C. E., Shelden, K.E., O’Corry-Crowe, G., Boor, G.K.H. & Wright, B. (2020). Anthropogenic scarring in long-term photo-identification records of Cook Inlet beluga whales, *Delphinapterus leucas*. *Marine Fisheries Review*, 82(3-4), 20-40.

McGuire, T. L. (2015). Photographing stranded beluga whales for identification. CIBW photo-ID project protocol.