

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

RIN 0648–XF132

New England Fishery Management Council; Public Meeting

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice of public meeting.

SUMMARY: The New England Fishery Management Council (Council, NEFMC) will hold a three-day meeting to consider actions affecting New England fisheries in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

DATES: The meeting will be held on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, January 24, 25, and 26, 2017, beginning at 9 a.m. on January 24, 8:30 a.m. on January 25, and 8:30 a.m. on January 26.

ADDRESSES: The meeting will be held at the Sheraton Harborside Hotel, 250 Market Street, Portsmouth, NH 03801; telephone (603) 431–2300; online at www.sheratonportsmouth.com.

Council address: New England Fishery Management Council, 50 Water Street, Mill 2, Newburyport, MA 01950; telephone: (978) 465–0492; www.nefmc.org.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Thomas A. Nies, Executive Director, New England Fishery Management Council; telephone: (978) 465–0492, ext. 113.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**Agenda**

Tuesday, January 24, 2017

After introductions and brief announcements, the meeting will begin with reports from the Council Chairman and Executive Director, NMFS's Regional Administrator for the Greater Atlantic Regional Office (GARFO), liaisons from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, representatives from NOAA General Counsel and the Office of Law Enforcement, and staff from the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission and the U.S Coast Guard. Following these reports, the Council will hear from its Monkfish Committee, which will provide an overview of the Mid-Atlantic Council's Dec. 13, 2016, actions regarding Monkfish Framework Adjustment 10 and Amendment 6. The Council also will revisit a postponed motion from its November meeting

regarding trip-boat requirements for monkfish gillnetters using 10" and larger-size mesh. Next, the Council will receive a presentation from GARFO staff on the Industry-Funded Monitoring (IFM) Omnibus Amendment. The Council will review public comments on the amendment and potentially select preferred alternatives.

After a lunch break, members of the public will be able to speak during an open comment period on issues that relate to Council business but are not included on the published agenda for this meeting. The Council asks the public to limit remarks to 3–5 minutes. The Atlantic Herring Committee will report next. During this segment of the meeting, the Council is scheduled to take final action on Framework Adjustment 5 to the Atlantic Herring Fishery Management Plan (FMP). This amendment was developed to potentially modify Georges Bank haddock bycatch accountability measures (AMs) in the herring midwater trawl fishery. Regarding Amendment 8 to the FMP, the Council will: (a) Review results from its recent Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) workshop; (b) preview potential alternatives for a new acceptable biological catch (ABC) control rule for Atlantic herring; and (c) receive a brief update on measures currently under development to address herring localized depletion and user conflicts. Following the herring report, the Council will adjourn for the day and then hold a 5 p.m. scoping hearing to solicit initial public input on Amendment 10 to the Northeast Skate Complex FMP, which is being developed to potentially limit access to the skate bait and skate wing fisheries.

Wednesday, January 25, 2017

The second day of the meeting will begin with a 15-minute closed session to allow Council members to consult on 2017–19 appointments to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). The open session will begin at 8:45 a.m. with a presentation by staff from the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management covering the recent New York commercial wind energy lease sale and revised environmental assessment. The Northeast Fisheries Science Center then will provide a Cooperative Research Review update. Next, staff from the Lenfest Ocean Program will give an overview of the Lenfest Task Force's new report titled "Building Effective Fishery Ecosystem Plans." Immediately following, the Council will hear from its own Ecosystem-Based Fishery Management Committee, which will provide a progress report on the development of operating models and a

draft example Fishery Ecosystem Plan for Georges Bank.

After a lunch break, the Northeast Fisheries Science Center will present new assessment results for witch flounder and black sea bass developed by the 62nd Stock Assessment Workshop/Stock Assessment Review Committee, commonly referred to as SAW/SARC 62. The SSC then will provide overfishing limit (OFL) and ABC recommendations for witch flounder. The Groundfish Committee will report next. During this segment of the meeting, the Council is scheduled to take final action on 2017–19 witch flounder specifications for Framework Adjustment 56 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP. In addition, the Council will provide recommendations to GARFO on fishing year (FY) 2017 Gulf of Maine cod and haddock recreational measures. It also will revisit a postponed motion from its November meeting to consider asking GARFO to investigate options for exempting fishermen from southern windowpane flounder accountability measures for FY 2017. The Council will close out the day by receiving a work update on 2017 groundfish priorities.

Thursday, January 26, 2017

The third day of the meeting will begin with an initial planning discussion about the upcoming programmatic review of Council operations. The Council in November voted to make the programmatic review a 2017 priority. Next, GARFO staff will provide a report on the region's Fishery Dependent Data Visioning Project summarizing GARFO/NEFSC efforts to modernize fishery dependent data collection. The Marine Mammal Commission (MMC) will report next. MMC staff will provide an overview of agency responsibilities and mandates and then present a preview of the MMC's April 5–7, 2017 annual meeting agenda.

The Council may not take a lunch break during this last day of its January meeting but instead proceed directly to "other business."

Although non-emergency issues not contained in this agenda may come before this Council for discussion, those issues may not be the subject of formal action during this meeting. Council action will be restricted to those issues specifically listed in this notice and any issues arising after publication of this notice that require emergency action under section 305(c) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, provided the public has been notified of the Council's intent to take final action to address the emergency.

Special Accommodations

This meeting is physically accessible to people with disabilities. Requests for sign language interpretation or other auxiliary aids should be directed to Thomas A. Nies (see **ADDRESSES**) at least 5 days prior to the meeting date.

Dated: December 30, 2016.

Jeffrey N. Lonergan,

Acting Deputy Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

RIN 0648-XU02

Endangered and Threatened Species; Recovery Plan for the Cook Inlet Beluga Whale

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice of availability.

SUMMARY: We, NMFS, announce the adoption and availability of an Endangered Species Act Recovery Plan for the Cook Inlet beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*) distinct population segment (DPS) found in Cook Inlet, AK.

ADDRESSES: The Recovery Plan is available on the NMFS Alaska Region Web site at: <https://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/pr/cib-recovery-plan>, or upon request from the NMFS Alaska Region contact listed below.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Mandy Migura, NMFS Alaska Region, telephone: (907) 271-1332, email: Mandy.Migura@noaa.gov; or Therese Conant, NMFS Office of Protected Resources, telephone: (301) 427-8456, email: Therese.Conant@noaa.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*), requires that we develop and implement recovery plans for listed species under our jurisdiction, unless it is determined that such a plan would not promote the conservation of a particular species. Recovery plans describe the specific actions considered necessary, based on the best scientific and commercial data available, to promote the conservation and recovery of species listed under the ESA.

We designated the Cook Inlet beluga whale DPS as endangered under the ESA on October 22, 2008 (73 FR 62919). The Cook Inlet beluga whale population declined nearly 50 percent from 653 belugas in 1994 to 347 belugas in 1998 (based on annual comprehensive and systematic aerial surveys), coincident with a substantial unregulated subsistence hunt. Despite a dramatic reduction in subsistence harvest of Cook Inlet beluga whales beginning in 1999, the population did not grow as expected, but continued to decline at 1.45 percent per year from 1999 to 2008, leading to its listing as endangered. The most recent (2014) abundance survey estimated a population of 340 Cook Inlet beluga whales, with a continued population decline of 0.4 percent per year from 2004 to 2014.

On May 15, 2015, we released the *Draft Recovery Plan for the Cook Inlet Beluga Whale* (Draft Recovery Plan) and published a notice of availability in the **Federal Register** (80 FR 27925) requesting comments. Twenty-three comment submissions were received during the 60-day public comment period on the plan. Concurrent with the public comment period, we also obtained review of the Draft Recovery Plan from five independent scientific peer reviewers. We considered all of the peer review and public comments received on the Draft Recovery Plan in developing the final version of the Recovery Plan.

The Recovery Plan

Section 4(f)(1) of the ESA requires that recovery plans incorporate, to the maximum extent practicable: (1) Objective, measurable criteria which, when met, would result in a determination that the species is no longer threatened or endangered; (2) site-specific management actions necessary to achieve the plan's goals; and (3) estimates of the time required and costs to implement recovery actions. The ultimate goal of the Recovery Plan is to achieve recovery of endangered Cook Inlet beluga whales to a level sufficient to warrant their removal from the List of Threatened and Endangered Wildlife and Plants under the ESA (delist). The intermediate goal is to reclassify Cook Inlet belugas from endangered to threatened (downlist). The Recovery Plan contains: (1) Background on Cook Inlet beluga whale natural history and population status; (2) a threats assessment, (3) biological and recovery criteria for downlisting and delisting, (4) actions necessary to promote the recovery of the species, (5) an implementation schedule, and (6) estimates of time and cost to recovery.

Ten potential threat types are identified and assessed in the Recovery Plan, based on current knowledge of threat factors. The threats assessment ranks each of these ten threats as high (catastrophic events, cumulative effects of multiple stressors, and noise), medium (disease agents, habitat loss or degradation, reduction in prey, and unauthorized take), or low (pollution, predation, and subsistence hunting) relative concern for Cook Inlet beluga whale recovery. Due to an incomplete understanding of the threats facing Cook Inlet beluga whales, we are unable to identify with certainty the actions that will most immediately encourage recovery. Until we know which threats are limiting recovery, the strategy of the Recovery Plan is to focus on threats identified as of medium or high relative concern. This should focus efforts and resources on actions that are more likely to benefit Cook Inlet beluga whale recovery.

The Recovery Plan incorporates both demographic and threats-based criteria which, when met, would indicate that reclassifying the species from endangered to threatened, or delisting the species, should be considered. The threats-based recovery criteria are designed to evaluate the five ESA section 4(a)(1) factors described in the ESA listing determination for Cook Inlet beluga whales.

In summary, Cook Inlet beluga whales may be considered for reclassification from endangered to threatened when: (1) The abundance estimate for Cook Inlet beluga whales is greater than or equal to 520 individuals, and there is 95 percent or greater probability that the most recent 25-year population abundance trend (where 25 years represents one full generation) is positive; and (2) the 10 downlisting threats-based criteria are satisfied. Cook Inlet beluga whales may be considered for delisting when: (1) The abundance estimate for Cook Inlet beluga whales is greater than or equal to 780 individuals, and there is 95 percent or greater probability that the most recent 25-year population abundance trend (where 25 years represents one full generation) is positive; and (2) the 10 downlisting and 9 delisting threats-based criteria are satisfied.

Because a comprehensive approach to Cook Inlet beluga whale recovery is likely to have greater success, rather than focusing on any one type of action, the recovery actions in the Recovery Plan include research, management, monitoring, and education/outreach efforts. When determining threats-based recovery actions, we aimed to improve understanding of those threats and their