

US Protection Sought for Depleted Beluga Whale Stock

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Washington, D.C.—Today, the Animal Welfare Institute, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, Cetacean Society International, and Earth Island Institute filed a petition with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to designate the Sakhalin Bay-Amur River stock of beluga whales in the Sea of Okhotsk as depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Subject to intense levels of historical hunting, these belugas have yet to recover and face serious ongoing threats, most notably from annual live captures for public display.

Since 1992, the Sakhalin Bay-Amur River region off the coast of Russia has been the only regular source of wild-caught belugas for public display worldwide. At present, there are an estimated 3,961 belugas in the Sakhalin Bay-Amur River stock—less than 30 percent of the stock’s estimated pre-exploitation population level. The MMPA authorizes NMFS to designate as “depleted” marine mammal species or stocks that are below their optimum sustainable population (OSP). Historically, NMFS has considered a species to have fallen below its OSP if it falls below 60 percent of its estimated historic population level. Over the last few years, NMFS, the Marine Mammal Commission, and the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission have all concluded that this stock is likely depleted.

“A depleted designation for this stock of belugas is long overdue,” said Susan Millward, executive director of AWI. “The best scientific information available indicates that these belugas are in serious trouble and deserve protection under the MMPA.”

In June 2012, Georgia Aquarium, Inc. submitted a permit application to import 18 beluga whales captured from the Sakhalin Bay-Amur River stock for public display. NMFS denied the request in August 2013, concluding that the proposed import could have significant adverse impacts on the stock and encourage additional beluga captures from this stock for public display worldwide. During the review process, both NMFS and the Marine Mammal Commission expressed concerns about the stock’s status due to historical hunting and, more recently, unsustainable removal levels linked to live captures for public display.

“Designating this stock of belugas as depleted under the MMPA is consistent with the letter, intent, and spirit of the statute’s international obligations, and encourages a precautionary approach to the management of all activities that continue to impact this vulnerable stock,” said Courtney Vail, campaigns and programs manager for Whale and Dolphin Conservation.

In addition to conferring certain protections under the MMPA, a depleted designation for the Sakhalin-Amur beluga whale stock would encourage the United States and foreign governments, conservation organizations, the scientific community, and funding institutions to support research and conservation efforts to help recover these belugas and protect their habitat.