

Summary of the Recovery Strategy for the Cumberland Sound Beluga

The Cumberland Sound Beluga (*Delphinapterus leucas*) was listed as threatened under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) in May 2017. As required under SARA, when a species is listed as threatened, a recovery strategy must be prepared. A recovery strategy is a planning document that identifies what needs to be done to stop or reverse the decline of a species. In 2020, during the drafting of the recovery strategy, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada reassessed the Cumberland Sound Beluga as endangered. Consequently, the recovery strategy may be amended at a future date if the listed SARA status under Schedule 1 changes.

The Beluga Whale is a toothed whale characterised by a blunt head, slight beak, fat, stocky body, and lack of a dorsal fin. Newborn calves range from light to dark mottled grey in colour. Juveniles gradually lighten in colour as they age until they become almost pure white at, or shortly after, the age of sexual maturity of approximately 10 to 14 years of age. The Cumberland Sound population of Beluga Whale was identified as a unique population in 2004 due to genetics, contaminant and movement data. Local Inuit knowledge and recent genetic studies have confirmed that there are two genetically distinct populations of Beluga Whale in Cumberland Sound, however based on information currently available, these two populations can only be assessed as a single stock. This recovery strategy may be amended at a future date if new information becomes available.

Subsistence harvest has been identified as the primary threat to Cumberland Sound Beluga. The subsistence harvest is under quota of 41 whales per year and a Fisheries Management (FM) management plan is being developed by the Cumberland Sound Beluga Working Group including the community of Pangnirtung to guide the conservation and sustainable use of the fishery and to ensure the harvest is conducted safely and effectively. The FM management plan is not a SARA legal instrument but will assist with achieving recovery goals. Other potential threats, and activities that may impede Cumberland Sound Beluga recovery include: noise and disturbance, pollution, and commercial fisheries that may compete for beluga prey. Killer Whale (*Orcinus orca*) predation, ice and tidal entrapment, disease/parasites, and environmental changes are among the natural limiting factors which may delay recovery or cause a decline in the population.

The population and distribution objective for Cumberland Sound Beluga is to protect, maintain and recover the population to levels that are self-sustaining such that the population is increasing to a stable size that is large enough to resist stochastic events and persist over the next 2 generations (that is, long-term ≥ 30 years).

To meet the population and distribution objective, the recovery strategy takes into consideration the uncertainty associated with current knowledge of Cumberland Sound Beluga and its environment. The strategic approaches proposed to meet the population and distribution objective are to:

- manage the harvest for the recovery of Cumberland Sound Beluga
- increase knowledge of the biology, seasonal distribution, abundance, and habitat requirements of Cumberland Sound Beluga
- identify and protect all Cumberland Sound Beluga critical habitat as soon as possible
- increase knowledge of how threats affect Cumberland Sound Beluga survival so that these threats can be prioritized and avoided, eliminated, or mitigated to the extent possible

A description of the broad strategies to address threats to the species' survival and recovery, as well as research and management approaches needed to meet the population and distribution objective, are included in section 7 of the recovery strategy. These will help inform the development of specific recovery measures in 1 or more action plans. An action plan relating to this recovery strategy will be produced within 5 years of the final recovery strategy being posted on the SARA Public Registry.

Using available data, critical habitat has been identified to the extent possible (section 8 of the recovery strategy). Critical habitat is defined in SARA as the habitat that is necessary for the survival or recovery of a listed wildlife species and that is identified in a recovery strategy or action plan for the species. Under SARA, critical habitat must be legally protected within 180 days after the recovery strategy or action plan that identified the critical habitat is included in the Species at Risk Public Registry. It is anticipated that the critical habitat identified in this recovery strategy will be protected by a Critical Habitat Order made by the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, which will trigger the prohibition in section 58(1) against the destruction of any part of the critical habitat. Based on available information, three areas of critical habitat are identifiable at this time; all are used by Cumberland Sound Beluga only seasonally. These areas are: Clearwater Fiord, the western side of Cumberland Sound, and the polynya/pack ice area near the mouth of Cumberland Sound. A description of critical habitat, including a figure showing the locations is included in section 8 of the recovery strategy. The schedule of studies outlines the research required to further identify critical habitat to help achieve the population and distribution objective.

Every 5 years, the success of the recovery strategy implementation will be measured against the following performance indicators:

- increase in the number of Cumberland Sound Beluga
- increase in the identification, description, location, and protection of critical habitat (until such time as it is believed that all critical habitat has been identified)
- assessment of biological characteristics indicating good overall health of Cumberland Sound Beluga (for example, body growth, reproductive health, lack of disease)
- a sustainable subsistence harvest which provides data for managing and monitoring stock recovery (for example, number of whales landed, number of whales struck and lost, biological samples or data on the harvest, observations of ice or tidal entrapments)
- all existing, new, or emerging human threats and natural, limiting factors identified during the 5 year period are monitored, their overall effects on the population are determined and, where possible, mitigated to lessen their effect on Cumberland Sound Beluga

Subsection 83(4) of SARA allows for certain activities to be exempt from the general prohibitions of SARA, provided the activities are permitted in recovery strategies, action plans or management plans and the person is also authorised under an Act of Parliament to engage in that activity. Subsection 83(4) can be used as an exemption, to allow activities which have been determined to not jeopardize the survival or recovery of the species. The recovery strategy provides the exemption that the summer and winter Greenland Halibut fishery may use long-lines, and their use will continue to be authorized under section 7 of the *Fisheries Act*.

Subsection 83(3) of SARA provides that the general prohibitions of SARA do not apply to a person who is engaging in activities in accordance with conservation measures for wildlife

species under a land claims agreement, and therefore exemptions are not required for these activities.