

Response Statement for Beluga Whale, St. Lawrence Estuary population

October 22, 2004

Common Name: Beluga Whale, St. Lawrence Estuary population

Scientific Name: *Delphinapterus leucas*

Status assessment by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC): Threatened

Reason(s) for status designation provided by COSEWIC: The population was severely reduced by hunting, which continued until 1979. High contaminant loads may have also contributed to the population decline. Aerial surveys since 1973 suggest that the decline has ceased, but do not provide clear evidence of a significant increase in numbers. Levels of many contaminants remain high in beluga tissues. The whales and their habitat are threatened by contaminants, vessel traffic, and industrialization of the St. Lawrence watershed.

Occurrence: Quebec, Atlantic Ocean

Competent Minister(s):

Minister of Fisheries and Oceans

Minister of the Environment

Provinces and territories to be consulted:

Quebec

Applicable federal legislation: Protected under the federal *Marine Mammal Regulations* under the *Fisheries Act*. Habitat protected under section 35 of the *Fisheries Act*. When found in the Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park, the species is protected under the *Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park Act* and the *Marine Activities in the Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park Regulations* made under that Act.

Conservation activities underway: An update recovery strategy is in development. The population is also benefiting from the St. Lawrence Action Plan. Various research projects have been ongoing in Saguenay – St. Lawrence Marine Park to support the recovery of the species.

How the Minister of the Environment intends to respond to the assessment: The Minister of the Environment will immediately forward the COSEWIC assessment of the Beluga Whale, St. Lawrence Estuary population to the Governor in Council (GIC). The Minister of Fisheries and Oceans will lead consultations with the government of Quebec, Aboriginal peoples, stakeholders, and the public on whether or not the Beluga Whale, St. Lawrence Estuary population should be added to the *List of Wildlife Species at Risk* (Schedule 1) under the *Species at Risk Act*. Information respecting opportunities to comment will be posted on the public registry. The Minister of the Environment will then review the comments received and, following consultation with the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, will make a recommendation to the GIC on whether or not to add the Beluga Whale, St. Lawrence Estuary population to the List. The GIC will make a decision within nine (9) months of having received the assessment.