

Issue: NMRWB Public Hearing to consider modifying the current Beluga Management System in the Nunavik Marine Region by removing or modifying the annual December 1 - January 31 closure of beluga hunting in Hudson Strait.

Background:

The 2021-26 beluga management plan seeks to balance the needs of Inuit harvesters and the need to rebuild the Eastern Hudson Bay (EHB) beluga stock. The new management regime is transformational in that it relies less on harvest limitations (TAT) and places increased emphasis on Non-Quota Limitations (NQL) to achieve its management objectives, particularly during the fall hunt in the Hudson Strait area. The NQLs implemented to reduce the risk of overharvest on the EHB beluga stock in fall were:

- a delayed fall opening date (starting on November 1st annually);
- a winter hunting closure from December 1st- February 1st; and
- the development of local conservation measures to guide sustainable harvest in November.

In agreeing to this changed regime, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) noted the difficulty in predicting whether these NQLs would maintain fall harvest levels of EHB beluga within the recommended conservation threshold.

Current Information:

Information provided to the co-management partners indicates that catches of EHB Belugas increased markedly after the first year of the current Beluga Management System. Specifically:

- The overall reported harvest of 96 EHB belugas substantially exceeded the threshold of 58 EHB beluga established to allow the EHB stock to return to its 2016 levels.
- The 2021 fall harvest of 34 EHB belugas exceeded the average fall catch of 21 EHB belugas in Hudson Strait between 2014-2019.
- Increased catches are reported from northeast Hudson Bay, which are expected to negatively impact the EHB stock. This area is not subject to the TAT or the fall closure.

DFO Questions:

The NMRWB launched this written Public Hearing to consider modifying/removing the annual December 1 - January 31 closure of beluga hunting in Hudson Strait. In view of the information reported above, DFO submits the following questions to the co-management parties:

1. What progress have the Hudson Strait LNUKS made to finalize local hunting rules, and will they be implemented in 2022?
2. Will the Hudson Strait communities participate with DFO to update our collective understanding of EHB seasonal migration patterns? The objective of this research would be to develop improved management measures from both knowledge streams (IQ and science).
3. What specific measures will the Hudson Strait LNUKs / RNUK adopt if the Hudson Strait winter closure is modified or withdrawn, to provide the NMRWB with continued confidence that by 2026 the EHB beluga stock can be rebuilt to levels observed in 2016?

DFO remains committed to working with all Nunavik co-management organizations to make resource management decisions that respect the *NILCA* and include the best available knowledge sources and systems. Representatives from DFO (Resource Management and Science Sectors) remain available to assist the NMRWB upon request.