

SUBMISSION TO PARTIES AT PUBLIC HEARINGS
Nunavik Marine Region Wildlife Board
August 23, 2022

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 2021-2026 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.

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 beluga exceeded the average fall catch of 21 belugas in Hudson Strait for the 2014-2019 interval.
- Increased catches of EHB are reported from northeast Hudson Bay, which are expected to negatively impact the EHB stock. The northeast Hudson Bay area is not subject to the TAT or the fall closure.

DFO Final submission

In 2020, the Minister approved (and modified) the current management Plan for the Nunavik beluga hunt for the period of 2021-2026. The final decision and management plan was varied to implement stronger conservation management measures. The Plan's management objective is to maintain the Eastern Hudson Bay Beluga stock at or above 3,400 animals during that period. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) last assessed this stock as threatened in 2020.

The Plan's management measures include a Total Allowable Take (TAT) of 20 belugas in the Eastern Hudson Bay Arc Region, as well as Non-Quota Limitations (NQL) for beluga harvesting throughout the Nunavik Marine Region, including seasonal closures in the Hudson Strait. The first seasonal closure is from September 1 to October 31, while the second, which is the focus of

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this public hearing, ranges from December 1 to February 1 annually. The Hudson Strait winter closure was implemented to further reduce the risk of overharvest on the EHB beluga stock.

Since quotas (TAT) have been in place in Hudson Strait for many years before the 2021-2026 management plan, and given how transformational the new management approach is, changes in harvesting patterns are difficult to predict and there is risk in changing management measures too quickly. Given the status of the EHB beluga stock, an increase in harvest is unacceptable from a conservation perspective. In that sense, any modification or withdrawal of a management measure to control effort should be balanced by additional measure(s) that equally help to achieve the plan's management objective. Furthermore, improvements can and should also be made without modifying existing measures. Based on the support heard by many participants at the July 20th public hearings, it would appear to the Department that a decision from the NMRWB to modify the Hudson Strait winter closure would not meet all LNUKs desire.

In its evaluation and decision on whether to modify or remove the winter closure in the Hudson strait, the NMRWB may wish to consider:

- the harvest of EHB belugas reported during the first year of the changed regime;
- the Hudson Strait closures were adopted as one of three complementary measures to reduce the risk of EHB overharvest, in addition of local hunting rules implemented by each LNUK and delaying the opening of the fall harvest;
- there is no management measure established for EHB beluga harvesting in northeastern Hudson -Bay. Based on this year's harvest results, a removal of the Hudson Strait winter closure could compound the risk of EHB overharvest.

In approving the 2021-2026 beluga management plan for Nunavik, the Minister requested the implementation of additional measures (in addition to the Hudson Strait closures) to control hunting effort in each Hudson Strait community. In that regard, DFO representatives (Resource Management and Science Sectors) remain available to assist the NMRWB upon request in identifying the most appropriate measures. All the conservation and harvest management measures to reduce the EHB beluga harvest during the fall hunt could be included in a hunting plan developed by each LNUK in collaboration with the RNUK, in accordance with the principles and powers described in sections 5.7.2 (c) and 5.7.4(c) and (g) of the NILCA. Controls on hunting effort can take different forms, including controlling the number of hunting days, hunting areas and subareas; requiring hunting techniques such as the use of harpoons to minimize the risk of losing wounded animals; and other methods to avoid EHB belugas being taken; for example:

- 1) limiting the number of belugas that could be harvested in a day by a single hunter and his family;
- 2) limiting the number of belugas that could be harvested by a hunter in a season;
- 3) establishing a regulation requiring that a beluga be harpooned before it could be shot;
- 4) delaying the opening of harvest season to further increase the probability that EHB animals have passed;

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- 5) limiting the number of boats that could harvest together or could harvest animals from the same belugas group on any harvest day;
- 6) expanding the fall closure zone to include NEHB where animals from the EHB stock are very vulnerable;
- 7) limiting engine size in boats used during hunting to reduce the disturbance of these activities.

These are some examples of harvest management measures that could be evaluated and discussed further in the spirit of co-management and help to promote our shared objective of maintaining annual harvests of EHB beluga within conservation limits. . It would be beneficial for the co-management partners and the affected communities to jointly explore potential improvements for later consideration by the NMRWB. This is why the Department, in its questions to parties at the present public hearing, asked about the communities willingness to participate in Science research initiatives. The Department strongly believes that information based on Inuit and DFO knowledge streams could generate additional interest from all of the co-management partners in developing recommendations designs to protect EHB beluga during their migration period.

DFO wishes to thank the NMRWB for the opportunity to submit and answer questions to parties in this Public Hearing, and 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.