Live extractions of belugas (Delphinapterus leucas) in Sakhalinskiy Bay in 2013 - population impact assessment.

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Within the Total Allowed Takes (TAT), Federal Fisheries Agency annually allocates quotas for beluga traditional harvest and live-captures for scientific-research and cultural-display purposes. Live-captures in the North-Okhotsk fishing subzone (NOS) of the Okhotsk Sea has been carried out since 1986 by the local people exclusively in the southern part of Sakhalinskiy Bay (SB). In 2012, number of belugas allocated for captures in NOS (212 ind.) was increased, compared to 2011, с. in 5 times. In 2013, permits further increased to 263 belugas (18 for scientific-research and 245 for educational and cultural-display purposes.) Increase in quota and the number of applicants in 2013 (14 against 3-5 in previous years) has led togrowth in number of capture teams, tools and catching gear - all in the traditional place of capture, along Baydukova and Chkalova islands in the southern part of SB. As the result of the captures in 2013, three teams caught and transported a total of 81 belugas. During capture operations themselves, 34 belugas (our observations and polling data) were killed. In addition, beluga deaths (minimum 7 ind.) were observed during temporary holding in SB. It is impossible to estimate mortality levels during capture operations, further transport and husbandry without supervision and account by inspectors of the respective services, because the corpses of belugas are often hidden they are transported offshore and sunk using weights. Earlier we reported low beluga mortality levels during captures in 2007-2010. The observed high mortality rate that in 2013 reached at least 50% of the legally taken whales was, probably, due to the inadmissibly high take claimed in SB and, consequently, competition among capture teams and involvement of inexperienced labour. Beluga mortality rates must be accounted in TAT calculation and special measures taken to decrease this negative impact on beluga whales in SB.