

News Release



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SERVICE SUSPENDS TRADE IN THREATENED BELUGA STURGEON FROM THE BLACK SEA BASIN

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is immediately suspending import and re-export of threatened beluga sturgeon (*Huso huso*) caviar and meat originating in the Black Sea basin, the agency announced today.

Countries covered by the suspension include Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, the Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, Turkey, and Ukraine. This follows an announcement on September 30, 2005, of the Service's decision to suspend trade in beluga sturgeon caviar and meat from the Caspian Sea.

The Service listed all beluga sturgeon populations as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (Act) effective October 21, 2004. To provide economic incentives for conservation efforts by Caspian Sea and Black Sea countries harvesting beluga sturgeon, the Service issued a special rule on March 4, 2005, setting certain conditions for exempting foreign and U.S. domestic commerce in beluga sturgeon products from the Act's permit requirements. The terms of the special rule parallel recent decisions on beluga sturgeon and other sturgeon species under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), a global agreement under which nearly 170 countries, including the United States, seek to regulate and monitor international wildlife trade through a system of permits.

“With today’s action,” said Interior Secretary Gale Norton, “the range countries of both the Caspian and Black Sea regions will not be allowed to import beluga sturgeon products into the United States until there is significant progress in the implementation of regional conservation programs. That’s the key to the ultimate recovery of this threatened species. We’re hopeful that this action will bring renewed attention to the plight of the beluga sturgeon, and that it will encourage the range countries to work to ensure its conservation.”

The special rule required Black Sea countries wishing to import beluga sturgeon caviar and meat into the United States to submit, by September 6, 2005, copies of their laws and management plans for the protection and conservation of the species. Three countries—Bulgaria, Georgia, and Serbia and Montenegro—provided some documentation, but did not meet the minimum requirements established in the special rule; no information has been received from the remaining countries. As a result, beluga sturgeon caviar (including products containing caviar, such as cosmetics) and meat from the Black Sea basin are no longer eligible for the exemption provided by the special rule. The trade suspension can be lifted if Black Sea countries submit satisfactory information at a later time.

Today's suspension applies to commercial shipments that have been exported directly from Black Sea countries or re-exported through an intermediary country, and to so-called "personal effects" originating in Black Sea countries. Until today, international travelers entering the United States could legally carry up to 250 grams of beluga sturgeon caviar for personal use without permits. However, imports of personal effects will no longer be allowed for beluga caviar from Black Sea countries. Today's action does not apply to caviar and meat from other sturgeon species such as osetra and sevruga and domestic white sturgeon caviar.

Domestic interstate commerce in beluga sturgeon caviar and meat from the Black Sea basin that was legally imported before the trade suspension will continue to be authorized under the special rule without a threatened species permit. Because of the perishable nature of sturgeon caviar and meat, this exemption expires 18 months from the date of the original CITES export permit.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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