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Ministries Scramble to Rescue Whales

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Authorities in Chukotka have launched a massive rescue operation to free more than 100 Beluga whales trapped by ice in the Bering Sea.

Local hunters discovered the animals trapped by a wide belt of 10- to 15-centimeter-thick ice in the Sinyavensky Channel near Arakachechen Island, just off the coast of Chukotka in the Bering Strait, on Wednesday.

A lack of food and advancing ice mean that the whales are likely to die if rescuers do not reach them, the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry said in an e-mailed statement Thursday.

The Rubin, a salvage tug, has been dispatched to the scene, but the Transportation Ministry said Thursday that the vessel was waiting for high winds and a heavy swell to recede before trying to break through the ice to the whales.

Beluga whales grow up to six meters long and can weigh two tons. They are classified as "near threatened" by the United Nations.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin heads a conservation program for the creatures, and in 2009 he attached a transmitter to a Beluga whale called Dasha. It is unclear whether she is among the trapped pod. Her last transmission was from the Sea of Okhotsk in September 2010, according to the government's web site.

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