



## STATEMENT FROM CAVIAR EMPTOR ON U.S. GOVERNMENT'S DELAY IN PROTECTING BELUGA STURGEON

(Washington, DC – October 22, 2004) Caviar Emptor is extremely disappointed in yesterday's announcement by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service that it will further delay protection for beluga sturgeon, despite the Service's declaration six months ago that the fish is "threatened with extinction."

The rule officially listing beluga sturgeon as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act went into effect yesterday. Under normal circumstances, the listing would have resulted in a ban on the import of beluga caviar because the Service has not yet completed a "special rule" to regulate caviar imports under the Act, as it had pledged to do. Instead, the Service has now issued an "interim" rule that allows beluga caviar imports into the United States to continue without *any* additional restrictions or controls under the Endangered Species Act. This decision is another nail in the coffin for beluga sturgeon.

The Caviar Emptor coalition (SeaWeb, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the University of Miami's Pew Institute for Ocean Science) is alarmed at the Service's lack of action and their deference to existing, inadequate international controls that have failed to halt the decline of beluga sturgeon. The beluga sturgeon population has declined by more than 90 percent in the past two decades.

The Service has not provided a rationale to justify its decision nor any scientific evidence to support its complete exemption of beluga sturgeon from the protections offered by the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Conservationists are alarmed because overwhelming scientific evidence collected shows that beluga sturgeon are on the brink of extinction and cannot support any level of fishing or trade, now or in the foreseeable future. The most recent data available shows that its numbers dropped nearly 40 percent in just one year, from 2001 to 2002, and that immature fish make up 85 percent of its population.

The United States is the world's largest importer of beluga caviar, accounting for 60 percent of the imports in recent years. It is evident that the Fish & Wildlife Service is putting trade before



conservation. The beluga sturgeon has been called the most valuable fish in the world because of its coveted caviar, which retails for more than \$100 an ounce in Western markets.

Caviar Emptor, which petitioned the U.S. government in 2000 to list beluga sturgeon under the Endangered Species Act, will continue to seek the strongest possible protection for beluga sturgeon. We will continue to urge the Service to impose a long-term ban on import of beluga caviar. It is also imperative that the Caspian states implement a comprehensive recovery plan that addresses overfishing, poaching, habitat loss and pollution.

The beluga sturgeon has lived since the days dinosaurs roamed the earth, but the question now is whether this magnificent fish will be able to survive the relentless pressure that feeds the world's appetite for its caviar. Often heralded as a 'status symbol', it is more important now than ever for consumers to know that it is in bad taste to eat the eggs of the threatened beluga sturgeon.

Consumers can help the beluga sturgeon survive for many years to come by choosing great-tasting, farmed caviar varieties that are better for the environment. For example, caviar varieties produced from sturgeon and paddlefish farmed in the United States offer excellent taste and are environmentally sustainable. There are many luxuries in life in which we can still indulge. The beluga sturgeon can't afford for us to indulge in this one.

Signed By:

Vikki Spruill, President, SeaWeb, Washington, DC

Lisa Speer, Senior Policy Analyst, Natural Resources Defense Council, New York City

Dr. Ellen Pikitch, Professor and Executive Director, University of Miami's Pew Institute for Ocean Science, Miami and New York City

###

For more information or interviews with Caviar Emptor spokespeople, please contact Shannon Crownover ([shannon@seaweb.org](mailto:shannon@seaweb.org)) or Steven Capozzola ([scapozzola@seaweb.org](mailto:scapozzola@seaweb.org)) at 202-483-9570. For a complete report on the decline of Caspian Sea sturgeon, see [www.caviareemptor.org](http://www.caviareemptor.org).