One of Atlanta’s top tourist attractions is caught in a national controversy over beluga whales.

Since the Georgia Aquarium submitted a permit application to a federal agency in June to import 18 wild-caught beluga whales from Russia, a media storm has erupted from coast to coast.

Animal rights activists are up in arms. Online petitions have gathered more than 5,000 signatures. And, publications from the San Francisco Chronicle to The New York Times have published articles.

“There are all kinds of protests and opposition going on everywhere,” said Lori Marino, a neuroscientist at Emory University, who has closely followed the issue. “Everybody knows about the 18 belugas at this point. But, especially nationally, it’s just been a firestorm.”

The aquarium’s beluga display has been a major draw for visitors since the attraction opened in 2005. The white whales are known for their expressive faces and blubbery bodies, making them a crowd favorite.

Aquarium officials contend they want to import the belugas in the name of conservation and research. It’s funded five years of research in Alaska and Russia, and wants to make sure there’s a sustainable population of belugas in captivity to study.

“We determined that there were not enough beluga whales in human care, in particular in North America,” said William Hurley, senior vice president and chief zoological officer at the aquarium.
Worldwide, there are a couple of hundred belugas in captivity. About 30 of those are in the United States.

“We turned over every stone,” Hurley said. “We looked at every option. We looked for every alternative. We found that if we are going to help protect beluga whales in the wild, then we have to have enough of them in our care to learn from. We knew that we did not have enough. We knew that this was a sustainable collection that goes on in Russia. And we decided to engage in an acquisition project to ensure that the Georgia Aquarium would continue to be a leader in global beluga conservation.”

Driving the opposition, perhaps, is the fact it’s been more than 20 years since an application has come to import wild-caught cetaceans, a class of marine animals that includes belugas and dolphins.

“This is such a change from what the public expects of these entertainment facilities,” said Marino, who said she’s collected signatures from more than 30 scientists against the aquarium’s application. “It’s really beyond the pale to go into waters and catch from the wild. That’s something that the public does not like ... It’s beyond what most people consider to be an ethical boundary.”

The 18 belugas whales were caught between 2006 and 2011 and are being kept in Russia.

If the permit is granted, Georgia Aquarium would take several of the belugas. The others would go to Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, Sea World of California in San Diego, Sea World of Texas in San Antonio, Sea World of Florida in Orlando and Mystic Aquarium in Connecticut.

“This one is unusual in that this is an import of recently collected belugas,” said Jennifer Skidmore, fisheries biologist with NOAA Fisheries, the federal agency that will grant or deny the permit. Skidmore is the lead permit analyst on Georgia Aquarium’s application.

More than 8,900 comments were collected on the application since Aug. 30.

“That is more than usual,” Skidmore said. “The majority of the comments are in favor of denying the permit.”

The next step, she said, is to review all the comments and request additional information from Georgia Aquarium, if necessary. A recommendation will then be sent to the director of NOAA’s Office of Protected Resources, who will grant or deny the permit.

“We’re hoping to have a decision made by the end of January or early February,” Skidmore said.

Scott Higley, vice president of marketing and communications for the Georgia Aquarium, said the aquarium has been transparent throughout the process. On its website, the aquarium has a section devoted to the belugas.

“We took this project to the media ourselves,” Higley said. “We wanted to get the information to the public ourselves.”
Higley and Hurley feel the aquarium is being unfairly targeted by extremist groups.

“The Georgia Aquarium does everything above board,” Hurley said. “Did we expect and did we prepare for the fact that there would be this small niche of minority [opposition] being vocal about this project? Absolutely.”

But, Marino says the aquarium’s reputation is on the line.

“The Georgia Aquarium has to really think about whether they want to do something like this that is going to turn the public against them,” she said. “The Georgia Aquarium has made certain decisions that don’t reflect well on the city. They reflect the bottom line, which is how many tickets get sold.”

Hurley disagrees.

“We are the experts. We are the professionals. We are the true animal lovers. And, we are not backing down that saving animals requires us to not only have them in our care, but also do great work in the wild with them.”

Amy Wenk covers hospitality, retail and restaurants.