



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Region 7 - Alaska

1011 East Tudor Road

Anchorage, Alaska 99503

(907)786-3309 (TDD Available)

News

Protection of Pacific Walrus Under the Endangered Species Act May Be Warranted, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Finds

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Contact: Rosa Meehan (907) 786-3800

Bruce Woods (907) 786-3309

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced that a petition to protect the Pacific walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus divergens*) under the Endangered Species Act presents substantial scientific or commercial information indicating that adding the species to the federal list of threatened and endangered species may be warranted. This preliminary finding is based, in part, upon projected changes in sea ice habitats associated with climate change.

As a result, the Service is initiating a more detailed status review to determine if listing the species is warranted and opening a 60-day public comment period in order to give all interested parties an opportunity to provide information on the status of the Pacific walrus throughout its range. The 60-day public comment period will close November 9, 2009.

Pacific walruses are distributed in the Bering and Chukchi Seas, generally in association with shallower waters. The walruses use floating ice for birthing and nursing calves, resting, protection from predators, and floating to new feeding areas. The total number of Pacific walruses is currently unknown. A 2006 joint survey by U.S. and Russian scientists collected population data using thermal imaging systems and satellite transmitters. Analysis of that survey data is ongoing, and final results are expected in late 2009.

Pacific walruses in the U.S. are currently managed under and protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. On February 8, 2008, the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) filed a petition with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the Pacific walrus as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and to designate critical habitat. The petition states that global warming will impact the Pacific walrus by degrading and eliminating critical sea-ice habitat, decreasing prey availability, altering interactions with predators and disease, and increasing human disturbance throughout the range. It claims that, without sea ice, the Pacific walrus will be forced into a shore-based existence for which it is not adapted.

The Service's preliminary finding triggers a more detailed status review, for which the Service is soliciting scientific and commercial information regarding the Pacific walrus, including:

- Information relevant to the factors described in the Endangered Species Act for making a listing determination which include 1) present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of the species' habitat or range; 2) overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, educational purposes; 3) disease or predation; 4) inadequate existing regulatory mechanisms; or 5) other natural or manmade factors affecting its

continued existence.

- The historical and current status of the population, including distribution, abundance, trends in abundance, population dynamics, taxonomy, and stock structure;
- Habitat selection and use, including both sea-ice and terrestrial haulouts, disturbance at haulouts, food habits, and effects of disease, competition, and predation on Pacific walruses;
- The effects of climate and environmental changes, sea ice changes, and ocean acidification on the distribution, abundance, and life history of Pacific walruses and their principal prey over the short and long term; and
- Information on the effects of other potential threat factors, including, but not limited to, oil and gas exploration and development, commercial fishing and shipping, contaminants and hunting;
- Information on the effects of ongoing conservation measures for the species and its habitat, and the distribution and abundance of Pacific walruses and their principal prey over the short and long term.

You may submit information by one of the following methods:

1. Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Search for docket FWS-R7-2009-0051 and then follow the instruction; or
2. U.S. mail or hand delivery to: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R7-2009-0051; Division of Policy and Directives Management, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 4401 N, Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203.

After the 60-day comment period closes, the Service will analyze all comments, taking into consideration existing information, and submit to the Federal Register a “12-month finding,” by September 10, 2010. The Service may determine that the listing is warranted, not warranted, or warranted but precluded by pending proposals for other higher priority species.

To view the Federal Register 90-day finding and get more information, please visit <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/walrus/wmain.htm> or call the Service’s Marine Mammal Management office at (907)786-3800.

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