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NOAA to Study Ice Seals for Possible Listing Under Endangered Species Act

NOAA's Fisheries Service has accepted a petition from a California environmental group seeking protection under the Endangered Species Act for an ice seal called the "ribbon seal" that inhabits Alaska's Bering Sea.

"In addition reviewing the ribbon seal, we are also preparing status reviews on bearded, spotted and ringed seals for possible listing," said Doug Mecum, Acting Administrator for the Alaska Region of NOAA's Fisheries Service. "While the four species of ice seals in Alaska all utilize various types of sea ice habitats, they use the ice in different ways. Therefore, careful status reviews of each species is warranted."

NOAA's Fisheries Service has until the end of this year to prepare a status review and make a decision whether to list the ribbon seals, so that species will be the initial focus of NOAA experts. Status reviews of the other three species of ice seals will be completed after the ribbon seal review.

In late December 2007, the San-Francisco-based Center for Biological Diversity petitioned NOAA's Fisheries Service to list the ribbon seal as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Their petition states that global warming threatens ribbon seals with extinction because of the rapid melt of sea ice habitat. The agency decided the petition provided enough information to indicate that action may be warranted under the law. (The notice filed with the Federal Register is available online at: <http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2008/images/fedregisterseal2.pdf>)

NOAA's finding was based, in part, on predicted changes in ribbon seals' sea ice habitat as a result of global climate change, the high allowable seal harvest set by the Russian federation in recent years, the potential impacts of oil and gas development and production in both the United States and Russia and the potential impacts of commercial fisheries and climate change on ribbon seal prey distribution and abundance.

Ribbon seals use the marginal sea ice zone in the Bering and Okhotsk Seas for reproduction, molting and as a resting platform. In the summer and fall, they forage in the Bering and Chuckchi seas.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA's Fisheries Service) is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 70 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

On the Web:

NOAA's Fisheries in Alaska: www.afsc.noaa.gov

NOAA: www.noaa.gov