

Feds to decide on listing ice seals as threatened

September 28 2009, By DAN JOLING , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- A federal agency must decide within three weeks whether spotted seals, which depend on sea ice off Alaska's coast, should be listed as a threatened or endangered species.

In addition, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration agreed to decide by Nov. 1, 2010, whether two other ice-dependent <u>seals</u>, ringed seals and bearded seals, should be listed.

A federal judge Friday approved the settlement between NOAA and the Center for Biological Diversity, which had sued to force a decision.

Center spokeswoman Rebecca Noblin said Monday the group was happy the agency had set the dates, since the summer <u>sea ice</u> minimum this year was the third-lowest since satellite measurements began in 1979.

"The quicker we can get protection for these seals, the better," she said.

NOAA officials in December denied listing ribbon seals as threatened or endangered. They said <u>climate models</u> project annual ice for the seals will continue to form each winter during the critical birthing and molting period. The Center for Biological Diversity has sued to reverse the decision.

John Kurland, acting deputy regional administrator of NOAA, said the agency has been studying spotted, ringed and bearded seals. Spotted seals had a similar distribution and an information overlap with ribbon seals,



he said.

Information on the other two types of seals is more complicated, and the extra time will let the agency incorporate information compiled by the state of Alaska, Kurland said.

Ringed, bearded and spotted seals use sea ice in different ways for giving birth, rearing pups and resting. All three live in the Bering, Chukchi or Beaufort seas off Alaska's western and northern coasts.

The Center for Biological Diversity petitioned to list the seals in May 2008, the same month former Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne declared polar bears threatened because of sea ice loss.

The agency missed the one-year deadline for a decision, and the environmental group sued.

Spotted seals use the edge of sea ice far from predators to give birth and nurse pups. Loss of sea ice and early ice breakup threaten their ability to rear young, according to the listing petition.

Ringed seals are the primary prey of polar bears. They are the only seals that can live in completely ice-covered waters, using stout claws to dig and maintain breathing holes. They excavate snow caves on sea ice to provide insulated shelters for themselves and their pups.

Early breakup of sea ice threatens lairs during critical rearing periods when pups are too young to survive in water, according to the group. Warming also can expose lairs and make pups vulnerable to polar bears and Arctic foxes.

Bearded seals give birth and rear pups on drifting pack ice over shallow waters where prey is abundant. The retreat of sea ice away from shallow



shelves decreases food availability, the environmental group said.

Federal agencies are required to consider how their regulatory decisions affect listed and threatened species.

On the Net:

Center for <u>Biological Diversity</u>: <u>http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/</u>

NOAA Fisheries Alaska: http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/

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Citation: Feds to decide on listing ice seals as threatened (2009, September 28) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <u>https://phys.org/news/2009-09-feds-ice-threatened.html</u>

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