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ENDANGERED SPECIES: U.S. officials looking to protect 10 penguin species

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The Bush administration is considering endangered species protections for 10 penguin species whose polar habitat is shrinking due to global climate change.

The Fish and Wildlife Service said listing "may be warranted" for the emperor, rockhopper and other penguin species in South America, southern Africa and Antarctica. The agency initiated a formal status review, the first step in the process of listing a species.

The move puts the penguins on the same path as the polar bear, which the agency proposed listing earlier this year. Environmentalists pressed for protecting both animals from threats due to warmer ocean temperature and diminished sea ice.

"In some ways, the emperor penguin is a mirror image of the polar bear, only at the southern pole instead of the north," said Kassie Siegel of the Center for Biological Diversity, which sued to protect both species.

The penguins were part of a petition from environmentalists to protect 12 species. The Center for Biological Diversity threatened to sue the administration last month, unless it responded to the listing request.

In their petition, the center said industrial fishing and climate change have led to declines in penguin species across the Southern Hemisphere. One of the penguins' main sources of food, krill, has declined by as much as 80 percent in the past 30 years, the group says. The emperor penguin colony featured in the movie "March of the Penguins" is half the size it was decades ago, according to the petition.

The rule from FWS says the petition included "substantial scientific or commercial information" indicating listing may be warranted for 10 penguins: the emperor, southern rockhopper, northern rockhopper, African, Humboldt, Fiordland crested, erect-crested, macaroni, white-flipped and yellow-eyed penguins. The agency said two other species native to New Zealand and Australia did not deserve ESA protection.

FWS will take public comment on the penguins and should decide by the end of the year whether or not to formally propose a threatened or endangered listing. The agency would then make a final listing determination in 2008. FWS officials are asking for feedback on the penguins, the effects of climate change on the species and information on other threats, like commercial fishing.

Most species listed under ESA live in the United States, but the list also includes over 500 foreign species. For those species, U.S. protections center around regulations and import restrictions, according to FWS.

The National Archives released an advance copy of the rule today. It is scheduled for publication in the *Federal Register* on Wednesday.