

# ENDANGERED SPECIES: Legal storm forming around Calif. shorebird

Allison Winter, *ClimateWire* reporter

An environmental group is preparing to sue the Bush administration in an effort to gain federal protection for a California seabird whose island habitat is threatened by climate change.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a formal notice of intent to sue yesterday in an attempt to force the administration to consider endangered species status for the ash storm-petrel. The notice follows a petition the group sent last October requesting protection for the petrel; the administration has not yet responded to the petition.

The small, smoke-gray seabird nests and forages on a handful of offshore islands near San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego. Its population has already experienced sharp declines. The largest colony in central California decreased by 42 percent from 1972 to 1992, according to a study from scientists at the Point Reyes Bird Observatory in California.

Other bird conservation groups have also raised a red flag over the petrel's decline. The National Audubon Society and American Bird Conservancy listed the seabird among the 20 most at-risk species on their most recent "Watchlist." The International Union for Conservation

of Nature and BirdLife International also have included the ash storm-petrel on their own endangered lists.

Bird endangered by rising sea levels, acidic oceans and offshore energy projects

The ash storm-petrel relies on island habitat for its breeding and foraging, placing it at particular risk as sea levels change and offshore energy development and shipping routes grow in areas that are part of the bird's normal flight patterns.

The bird's only other habitat outside of California is on a few islands off Mexico's Baja peninsula.

There have been no published scientific studies on the potential effects of climate change on the storm-petrel. But Shaye Wolfe, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the scientific studies predicting sea level rise and increasingly acidic oceans do not bode well for the bird's food sources or island habitat.

"The ash storm-petrel is facing a barrage of multiple threats from coastal development and global warming that are threatening survival of the species," Wolfe said.

The center's petition predicts sea-level rise could drown important habitat



An ash storm-petrel chick at Farralon National wildlife refuge. Photo by Jesse Irwin, courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

for the bird in sea caves and offshore rocks. Warmer, less productive waters and ocean acidification are expected to reduce the numbers of the storm-petrel's prey -- small larval fish and plankton.

The petrel is also affected by offshore energy terminals and shipping traffic, especially lights that can confuse its nocturnal flights.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials said yesterday that they had determined that the risk to the species would not warrant emergency action. The agency plans to make a finding in 2008 on whether to consider listing the species, agency spokesman Scott Flaherty said yesterday. The Endangered Species Act requires a response within 90 days, but Flaherty said budget and litigation-driven deadlines often take precedence.