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## Group announces intent to sue over walrus petitions

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- A conservation group gave notice Tuesday that it will sue to force federal action on a petition to list the Pacific walrus as a threatened species because of threats from global warming and offshore petroleum development.

The deadline was May 8 for an initial 90-day review of the petition by the U.S. Department of the Interior, according to Center for Biological Diversity attorney Brendan Cummings.

The group filed the petition in February.

Shaye Wolf, a biologist and lead author of the petition, said Arctic sea ice is disappearing faster than the best predictions of climate models.

"As the sea ice recedes, so does the future of the Pacific walrus," she said.

The conservation group was one of three that successfully petitioned to have polar bears listed as threatened because of sea ice loss caused by global

warming, a decision announced May 14 by Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne. That listing also followed court action to force deadline decisions.

Bruce Woods, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman in Anchorage, said the agency is close to finishing a walrus survey.

"We do have a population count from the 2006 survey that should be finalized soon," he said. "That will give us a better basis for evaluating the petition."

The law calls for a 90-day review to determine whether listing petitions contain "substantial information." If a petition passes that first hurdle, the agency has nine months more to perform a status review on walrus and determine whether a listing may be warranted.

If a species is proposed for listing, the agency has one more year to collect additional scientific research and public testimony.

Arctic sea ice last summer dwindled to 1.65 million square miles, the lowest level since satellite measurements began in 1979, according to the National Snow and Ice Data Center at

the University of Colorado. In September, that sea ice was 39 percent below the long-term average from 1979 to 2000.

Sea ice in the Chukchi Sea between Alaska's northwest coast and the Russian Far East receded beyond the shallow outer continental shelf where walrus traditionally dive to reach their prey, clams and other creatures on the ocean floor.

As many as 6,000 walrus late last summer and fall abandoned the remaining ice, which covered deep water, and congregated on Alaska's northwest shore.

Herds were larger on the Russian side, where one group included as many as 40,000 animals, according to Russian observers. They estimated 3,000 to 4,000 mostly young walrus died in stampedes when herds rushed into the water at the sight of polar bears, hunters or low-flying aircraft.

Aside from stampedes, biologists worry that if current ice trends continue, and walrus are based on coastlines every summer, they will put tremendous pressure on nearby foraging areas rather than rich offshore feeding areas they

historically have reached by living on the edge of the ice pack.

Females and their young traditionally use ice as a diving platform, riding it north in spring and summer like a conveyor belt over offshore foraging areas, first in the northern Bering Sea, then into the Chukchi Sea.

Besides receding ice, conservation groups see threats from offshore petroleum development. The

federal Minerals Management Service in February leased more than 2.7 million acres of sea floor in the Chukchi Sea and seismic surveys are planned this summer.

A walrus listing would not affect subsistence harvest by Alaska natives, according to the environmental group.

Listing a species as “threatened” means it is likely to become endangered. “Endangered” is

more dire and means a species is in danger of extinction throughout all or much of its range.