

Interior to consider rare loon for endangered listing

Alaska Newspapers Inc.
editor@alaskanewspapers.com

April 10, 2008 at 9:21AM AKST

The Interior Department has agreed to decide by February whether the rare yellow-billed loon should be listed under the Endangered Species Act, according to a written statement from the Center for Biological Diversity.

A decision to list the bird could affect efforts to allow oil and gas development at North Slope sites near Teshekpuk Lake and along the Colville River.

The San Francisco-based Center and other conservation groups filed suit in December 2007 against the U.S. Department of the Interior, the agency charged with protecting endangered wildlife, after the agency had fallen more than two years behind the legal deadline for taking action to protect the species, the statement said.

The agreement to issue the overdue listing proposal was announced today, April 10.

The yellow-billed loon breeds in tundra wetlands in Alaska, Canada, and Russia, wintering along the west coast as far south as California. The species has a global population of approximately 16,000 individuals, of which about 4,000 breed in Alaska, the statement said.

Most yellow-billed loons breeding in Alaska breed in the western Arctic in areas being eyed for oil and gas development. Much of the species' habitat in Russia is subject to rapid oil and gas development.

A previous federal decision to allow oil development near Teshekpuk Lake was overturned by the courts last year. But the administration is nearing completion of a new plan that would once again open up the area for oil development, the statement said. "The yellow-billed loon is one of the rarest and most vulnerable birds in the United States, and it is at risk of getting trampled in the rush to develop oil and gas in the Arctic," said Andrea Treece, attorney with the Center. "This settlement is an important step toward ensuring that this remarkable species doesn't fall victim to our fossil-fuel addiction."

Throughout their range, yellow-billed loons are also threatened by changing ocean conditions and the inundation of low-lying wetlands in the face of global warming and sea-level rise, the statement said.

In April 2004, the Center, Pacific Environment, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Trustees for Alaska — along with several Russian scientific and conservation organizations — filed a formal administrative petition seeking protection of the species.

By law, the Department of the Interior was required to make an initial finding on the petition within 90 days and issue a proposed rule within one year of the petition, the statement said. In June 2007, the Department of the Interior finally responded to the petition and concluded that the loon may warrant the protections of the Endangered Species Act.

A copy of the petition, as well as more information on the yellow-billed loon, can be found at www.biologicaldiversity.org. A copy of a detailed status review on the species can be found at http://www.trustees.org/publications/publications_index.html.