

Alaska rejects listing for Kittlitz's murrelet

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DAN JOLING

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JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) ? The Palin administration has rejected a request to list an Alaska seabird as a state endangered species.

Fish and Game Commissioner Denby Lloyd said by letter Thursday it would be premature to list Kittlitz's murrelets because there is insufficient information to determine that their numbers have decreased so much that their existence is threatened, the requirement for listing under Alaska law.

Center for Biological Diversity biologist Shay Wolfe said the decision ignores surveys that have documented heavy declines of 80 to 90 percent of Kittlitz's murrelets in core areas of their range. The decision defies science, reason and the law, she said Friday by phone from San Francisco.

"For the Palin administration to claim that there is 'insufficient information' to conclude that the Kittlitz's murrelet is declining is equivalent to saying there is insufficient information to conclude the earth is round," Wolf said.

The Center for Biological Diversity last month petitioned to protect the seabirds because of the effect of global warming on their habitat, the outflow of glaciers into ocean water.

During summer breeding, the birds concentrate in coastal waters near tidewater glaciers and glacier outflows. The birds have large eyes that allow them to find fish, zooplankton and other prey in turbid glacial waters, according to the listing petition.

Global warming has increased surface temperatures in Alaska and contributed to the dramatic retreat and thinning of coastal glaciers, Wolfe said, reducing the Kittlitz's murrelet foraging habitat. Her organization estimates there are 15,000 Kittlitz's murrelets in Alaska and perhaps 5,000 more in Siberia.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has documented declines of more than 80 percent in at least four study areas, including Prince William Sound and the Kenai Fjords, but has not placed the seabirds on a list of threatened or endangered species. The federal agency in 2004 determined that the seabirds warranted protection but were "precluded" from listing by other agency priorities.

Fish and Wildlife spokesman Bruce Woods said last month the birds have moved up on the agency's hierarchy list and a status review could begin within a year.

Lloyd said the state officials have doubts about federal surveys. Differing survey methods, he said, have been used and consistent range-wide monitoring is not occurring.

Also, he said, surveys may be biased due to misidentification because Kittlitz's murrelets closely resemble common marbled murrelets.

The department's endangered species coordinator, Doug Vincent-Lang, said the uncertainties are enough to not list the birds at this time

"We really don't have a complete range-wide estimate," he said Friday. The department plans to monitor other research and hopes to sponsor a workshop within the next year to evaluate information gaps and develop a research plan and conservation strategy for the birds.

Wolfe said the World Conservation Union lists the Kittlitz's murrelet as critically endangered and seabird scientists with expertise on them say they may disappear within two decades in core areas of their range if current trends continue.

"Both the state and federal level agencies are burying their heads in their sand rather than doing their duty," she said.

The state manages gillnet fisheries and could reduce seabird death by adopting measures on where and when nets are set, she said.

"It shows a lack of leadership by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the Palin administration," she said.

Vincent-Lang said bird bycatch is the kind of information that is not in hand.

"We don't know in any specific location what the magnitude of the catch is either temporally or spatially," he said.