

Group petitions states to block ocean acidification

By DAN JOLING

Associated Press Writer

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska

A conservation organization has requested that Alaska and six other states _ including New Jersey _ add bodies of water to their list of impaired waterways: the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

The Center for Biological Diversity, based in San Francisco, requested that Alaska, Washington, Oregon and Hawaii list the Pacific Ocean as impaired under the federal Clean Water Act. The group wants New York, New Jersey and Florida to list the Atlantic.

The reason: ocean acidification, the changing of sea water chemistry because of absorption of carbon dioxide produced by humans.

A center attorney, Miyoko Sakashita, said listing the oceans as impaired under the Clean Water Act would allow states to set limits on the discharge of pollutants.

Lynda Giguere, spokeswoman for the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, said neither Commissioner Larry Hartig nor Division of Water Director Lynn Kent had seen the request Wednesday.

Alaska periodically reviews such requests, she said, and this one will be considered in a process allowing public comment.

The ocean's absorption of CO₂ is quietly and lethally altering its fundamental chemistry, Sakashita said.

"We must act now to prevent global warming's evil twin, ocean acidification, from destroying our ocean ecosystems," she said.

A similar petition was submitted in California in February.

A comprehensive national policy to curb greenhouse gas emissions would be preferable, Sakashita said.

"Since we don't have that right now, using the Clean Water Act is the strongest law we have that addresses water quality," she said.

The law applied to oceans traditionally has been used to stop land-based pollution. However, the law covers both point and "nonpoint" sources of pollution such as farm runoff, she said, and has been used against mercury emitted from smokestacks.

It's not the first time the group has taken on greenhouse gas emissions by using laws on the books. The center filed the initial petition seeking protection for America's polar bears under the Endangered Species Act because of the effect of global warming on the animals' primary habitat, Arctic sea ice.

Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne in December proposed listing polar bears as "threatened" and must make a final listing decision near the end of the year.

In polar bears, the beloved and revered symbols of the Arctic, the group has a "charismatic megafauna" to raise the visibility of its cause. For ocean acidification, one fear is the effect on a far tinier organism, plankton.

According to the request to states, oceans absorb about millions of tons of carbon dioxide each day and have absorbed

about half of the CO2 released by human activities. Excess carbon dioxide makes sea water more acidic, about 25 to 30 percent more since preindustrial times because of human-generated carbon dioxide, Sakashita said.

The change makes certain compounds unavailable that are necessary for marine organisms to build shells and skeletons, impeding the growth of plankton, Sakashita said.

Brendan Cummings, the center's ocean program director, said plankton is a basic thread in the ocean food web, a source of food for sockeye salmon and the prey of the other four Pacific salmon. Krill eat plankton and other species feed on krill, including baleen whales, he said.

"If you lose these species," Cummings said of the plankton, "the whole food web unravels."

Hawaii and Florida have coral reefs that ocean acidification will erode more quickly than they can rebuild, Cummings said. The growth of starfish, urchins, oysters and other shelled organisms also could be affected.

If ocean waters are listed, the law would require states to limit carbon dioxide pollution entering the ocean waters under their jurisdiction, according to the center.

Alaska has more than 6,600 miles of coastline. Like global warming, ocean acidification will be felt in Alaska sooner and could undermine the basis of oceanic life, Cummings said.

"Ocean acidification is one of those things we hope the public and the policymakers wake up to," he said.