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Pacific Walrus Threatened by Global Warming, Oil Development: Feds Considering ESA Protections

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Finally, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is reviewing the status of the Pacific walrus to determine whether or not the marine mammal will receive Endangered Species Act protections.

The Center for Biological Diversity stated that the Pacific walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus divergens*) is facing a double threat to its ice habitat: Global warming and increased oil development.

A petition seeking protection for the Pacific walrus was submitted by the Center back in February 2008. After the USFWS failed to respond to the petition, the Center filed a lawsuit - prompting the USFWS to take action.

Disappearance of sea ice due to global warming

The Pacific walrus inhabits the Arctic seas between Alaska and Siberia, and requires sea ice in order to survive; walruses cannot live on land. The ice serves as a platform for the animals as they forage for clams and mussels. For female walruses and their nursing calves, the ice floes are vital resting platforms, as the young walruses are not strong enough to swim continuously. Sea ice is also a necessity for all walruses during the winter breeding season.

In 2007, a high number of walrus calves were trampled to death as the accelerated disappearance of summer sea ice forced the walruses into unusually dense herds on land. And without ice platforms on which to rest, calves have been seen dying in the sea, exhausted and unable to keep up with their mothers.

Oil development in Pacific walrus habitat

In addition to global warming, planned oil development in the Chukchi Sea off Alaska poses a threat to the Pacific walrus, as it is the most important foraging area for the species. The Chukchi Sea is also home to one of only two United States populations of polar bears.

2.7 million acres of the Chukchi Sea off Alaska was leased to oil companies by the Bush administration in 2008. Now this key Pacific walrus habitat is being auctioned off to oil companies; Arctic melting and global warming will be further accelerated by continued oil development activities.

Global warming: The “grim reaper”

The Center’s Rebecca Noblin believes that assigning protected status to the Pacific walrus is necessary to save this species from the effects of global warming.



The Endangered Species Act is our nation’s strongest law for wildlife protection and, properly applied, can help the walrus survive the stress of a melting Arctic. But unless we take immediate action to reduce greenhouse pollution, the grim reaper of global warming will ultimately claim the Pacific walrus as a victim.

The USFWS must make a decision as to whether the species should be protected on September 10, 2010. Subsistence harvest of the species by Alaska natives is exempted from the law’s prohibitions.

Here’s to the Center for Biological Diversity for working to protect the Pacific walrus!