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US lawsuit targets pesticide impact on polar bears

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By Yereth Rosen

ANCHORAGE, Alaska, Dec 3 (Reuters) - The U.S. government violated the Endangered Species Act by failing to curb use of pesticides that have been accumulating in the Arctic food chain and in the fat of polar bears, a species listed as threatened, environmentalists charged in a lawsuit on Thursday.

While the biggest threat to polar bears comes from the rapidly warming Arctic climate and the disappearance of sea ice, the pesticide onslaught creates more woes for an already stressed population, said Rebecca Noblin, a Center for Biological Diversity staff attorney in Anchorage.

"The health impacts of pesticides tend to make polar bears more susceptible to disease, to lower cub survival," Noblin said. "Since polar bears are already struggling, the combined impacts of the two could lead to more problems."

The Center for Biological Diversity filed the lawsuit against the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in U.S. District Court in Seattle.

The lawsuit is probably the first to target the impact of pollutants emitted far away on an Endangered Species Act-listed population, Noblin said.

Persistent organic pollutants commonly contained in pesticides are known to be carried by atmospheric and ocean currents thousands of miles (km) northward to the Arctic.

Tony Brown, a spokesman for the EPA's regional office in Seattle, said the agency had no immediate comment on the lawsuit.

The lawsuit targets 14 types of pesticides it says scientists have found in alarming quantities in lakes, snowpack and fish and animals' bodies in the far north.

They include Atrazine, an herbicide from Syngenta AG (SYNN.VX) commonly used by corn growers, and Endosulfan, also used in agricultural operations and produced by Bayer Cropscience Ltd, a unit of Bayer AG (BAYGn.DE).

None of the pesticides listed in the lawsuit is used in Alaska, Noblin said.

There have been other legal actions that resulted in local pesticide limits for the benefit of endangered or threatened species.

A settlement earlier this year between the center and the EPA resulted in new restrictions on 74 pesticides considered dangerous to 11 threatened and endangered species in California.

The problem of pollutants transported into the Arctic has been an issue of international concern.

Under the 2004 Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, nearly 200 nations have agreed to reduce or eliminate the use of 12 chemical compounds, including dioxins, polychlorinated biphenyls, or PHBs, and DDT.

The U.S. government signed the convention but the Senate has yet to ratify the treaty. (Reporting by Yereth Rosen; Editing by Peter Cooney) ((San Francisco Newsroom +1 415 677 3939))