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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

U.S. studies protection for ribbon seal

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Federal scientists have decided to consider the little-known ribbon seal for listing under the Endangered Species Act on the basis of a petition presenting evidence that its Arctic sea ice home is melting.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service, acting on a request by an environmental group with offices in San Francisco, agreed Wednesday to determine by the end of the year whether the ribbon seal's very survival is threatened as a result of global climate change and should be protected under the law.

NOAA also agreed to review the status of three other ice seals for possible listing - bearded, spotted and ringed seals.

The scientists put the ribbon seal at the top of the list because of imminent threats from the effects of climate change, hunting, and oil and gas development and production, agency representatives said.

The U.S. Commerce Department's NOAA has protection responsibilities for seals, dolphins and whales.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Interior Department has



NOAA / Michael Cameron via AP

An adult male ribbon seal rests on pack ice in Russia's Gulf of Ozernoy. Less Arctic sea ice means less habitat for birthing pups. NOAA photo, 2005, by Michael Cameron via Associated Press

responsibility for the polar bear, the first animal species under consideration for listing as a result of global warming. The department missed a January deadline to recommend whether the bear warrants protection under the act. The Interior Department's inspector general has begun a preliminary investigation into why the decision has been delayed.

In February, oil companies won leases in the Chukchi Sea, which is a major summer feeding area for the ribbon seal, the polar bear and other marine mammals. If the seals

and other species were listed under the act, such activities as oil and gas development, shipping and the release of greenhouse gases could come under stricter regulation.

The NOAA based its decision to review the status of the seals on projections over the loss and thinning of Arctic sea ice, the high quotas for seal hunting set by the Russians in recent years as well as potential harmful effects of oil and gas development and production in both the United States and Russia, according to officials.

Commercial fishing and climate change also can be affecting the food supply of the ribbon seal, they said.

In December, the Center for Biological Diversity filed the petition requesting a review for the ribbon seal.

“During the late winter through early summer, ribbon seals rely on the edge of the sea ice in the Bering and Okhotsk seas off Alaska and Russia as safe habitat for giving birth

and as a nursery for their pup,” the petition said. “But this winter sea-ice habitat is rapidly disappearing. If current ice-loss trends from global warming continue, the ribbon seal faces likely extinction by the end of the century.”

In a statement issued Wednesday, Brendan Cummings, the center’s oceans program director, said the ribbon seal’s winter sea-ice habitat is projected to decline 40 percent by midcentury under greenhouse gas emissions models.

“Any remaining sea ice will be much thinner and unlikely to last long enough for ribbon seals to finish rearing their pups, leading to widespread pup mortality,” Cummings said.