

NOAA to Assess Whether Melting Ice Endangers Seals

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Ribbon seals such as this one are among four types of seals to be evaluated. (By Michael Cameron -- Associated Press)

The [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) announced yesterday that it will evaluate whether four kinds of seals inhabiting [Alaska's Bering Sea](#) should be placed on the endangered species list because of melting sea ice.

In December, an environmental group, the [Center for Biological Diversity](#), petitioned NOAA's Fisheries Service to list ribbon seals as facing extinction because global warming has affected the extent of ice cover in both the Bering and Chukchi seas, where the seals live. NOAA officials said they will review the status of bearded, spotted and ringed seals, as well, because they all use the same sea ice in different ways, at different times of the year.

The decision highlights the extent to which federal officials are grappling with climate change's impact on vulnerable species. The Fisheries Service has placed two species of coral on the endangered species list in part because of global warming, and the [Interior Department](#) was supposed to announce in January whether it would declare the polar bear in danger of extinction. Environmentalists sued the department because it has not published the decision. Congressional Democrats are investigating the matter.

John Bengtson, a scientist at the National Marine Mammal Laboratory in NOAA's Alaska Fisheries Service Center, said researchers need to better understand how changes in annual sea ice affect the seals. "We know the marginal sea ice zone is an important habitat for them during breeding, pupping and molting," he said of the ribbon seals. "There's an awareness that sea ice ecosystems are changing right now in ways we don't fully understand."

Jim Overland, an oceanographer at NOAA's Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory, said that while ice in the [Chukchi Sea](#) has been disappearing earlier during the year, ice in the Bering Sea "is still highly variable from year to year." The ice cover in the Bering Sea, which forms in December, melts in May and spans the size of [California](#), was 15 percent below normal from 2000 to 2005, but it has been closer to normal or even above average since then. According to computer models, Overland said, the Bering Sea ice cover will be half its current size by 2050.

NOAA officials must prepare a review of ribbon seals by the end of the year and will complete the other three status reviews after that. The agency said in a statement that it decided to look at ribbon seals because of reduced ice caused by climate change and at "the high allowable seal harvest set by the Russian federation in recent years, the potential impacts of oil and gas development and production in both the United States and [Russia](#) and the potential impacts of commercial fisheries and climate change on ribbon seal prey distribution and abundance."