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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Protection for penguins

Nonprofit wants 12 species added to endangered list

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Penguins in the Southern Hemisphere need extra protection under U.S. environmental law to withstand the onslaught of global warming and overfishing, according to a petition filed this week with federal wildlife officials.

Twelve of the world's 19 species of penguins may be marching toward extinction if the U.S. government doesn't put them under the wing of the Endangered Species Act, argues the petition prepared by the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, a national group with a branch in San Francisco.

"The same thing could happen to the emperor and Adelie penguins as is happening to the polar bear in the Arctic," Bay Area marine biologist David Ainley said Thursday, speaking from Ross Island off Antarctica about two species that live on sea ice. "They don't exist if there is no sea ice."

The government must limit industrial fishing in the Antarctic Ocean to preserve the penguins' food supply as well as control emissions of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere that lead to warming of oceans, which melts their sea ice home, the petition says.

The petition, filed with the Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington, comes within 18 months of audiences flocking to movie halls to watch emperor penguins trundle across icy fields to hatch and feed fluffy babies in "March of the Penguins." Now "Happy Feet" is entertaining children with animated tap-dancing penguins fending off hulking vessels with giant nets competing for fish.

Kassie Siegel, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity who helped write the petition, praised the films, saying the Humboldt, rockhopper, African, macaroni and Galapagos penguins have declined as a result of warming ocean conditions and overfishing of species including

krill, the shrimplike creature at the base of the food web, and Patagonia toothfish, which is sold as Chilean sea bass.

In Washington, Chris Tollefson, a spokesman for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said the agency had just received the petition. "Obviously, we'll evaluate it and make a decision." Under the law, the agency has 90 days to respond.

Under scenarios for global warming in the coming decades, the southern and northern poles are expected to undergo the most extreme changes.

The Arctic is already warming at a rate faster than the rest of the world. Over the past 30 years, the amount of floating sea ice that freezes in the summer has been diminishing, and less ice has been re-forming in the winter. In addition, the Greenland ice sheet has been melting more quickly.

The Antarctic is more complicated. In some parts, the sea ice is expanding, and in others it's shrinking. The ice cap over

eastern Antarctica is increasing, while the western Antarctica ice sheets are decreasing in size.

Seven species of penguins “have been affected dramatically by depletion of their food from industrial fisheries,” said Ainley, who spoke by telephone during a summertime snowstorm. “The emperor and Adelie penguins, the two true high-latitude Antarctic species, are about to be affected,” he said. Ainley, formerly at Point Reyes Bird Observatory, is on a two-month field study of the more than 190,000 Adelie penguin pairs now nesting on three capes in southern Antarctica.

The Adelie and emperor have suffered some losses in colonies where there is less sea ice in the warmer, northern part of Antarctica, Ainley said, although most of the population has yet to experience harm.

The Center for Biological Diversity has petitioned the Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the polar bear under the federal act. A court has set Dec. 27 as the deadline for a decision.

If an animal or plant is listed, federal agencies must consider the species’ welfare when making many decisions. For example,

because global warming is a threat to the survival of the polar bear, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency would have to consider greenhouse-gas emissions from utilities or factories when it approves permits, the environmental group argues.

In the case of polar bears and penguins, the agencies would have to consider whether commercial activities contributed to depletion of food supply and habitat or other harm, the group says.