



November '08 deadline set for sea otter habitat

Date comes three years after animals listed as threatened

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The Associated Press

ANCHORAGE - A federal agency has until November 2008 to decide whether to designate critical habitat for sea otters in southwest Alaska, where the smallest of marine mammals are becoming increasingly scarce.

The deadline on critical habitat to support the animals' recovery comes more than three years after the animals were listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Normally, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would have had to designate critical habitat when the animals were listed as threatened on Aug. 9, 2005, said Miyoko Sakashita, a lawyer for the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity, which filed a lawsuit to get the federal agency to act more quickly to protect the animals.

"It has been eight years since they have been aware of this problem," she said Thursday.

If the Fish and Wildlife Service decides critical habitat is needed, it has until Oct. 1, 2009, to make the designation.

The agency previously indicated in response to public comments that it



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Floating by: This 2006 photo shows Southwest Alaska sea otters floating in a net during a research project in the waters off of Alaska's Aleutian Islands.

would designate critical habitat for southwest Alaska sea otters.

However, the situation needs more study, including the economic impacts to fishing, shipping, port activities and oil and gas development, if critical habitat is designated, said Rosa Meehan, chief of the agency's marine mammal program in Anchorage.

"We agree that habitat protection may be an important factor," she said.

Ninety percent of the world's sea otters live in coastal Alaska. The

statewide population is believed to be about 70,000, with about 41,000 of those in southwest Alaska.

The Aleutian Island chain in southwest Alaska once had an estimated 75,000 sea otters. Now, there are about 8,700 among the islands that extend far out into the Bering Sea.

The reason for the decline is not known. Meehan said the prominent theory continues to be that killer whales are eating more sea otters because of the decline in larger marine mammals.

Meehan said the killer whale theory prevails because there is no other evidence that any other mechanism is at work for causing numbers in the Aleutians to plummet.

When Southwest Alaska sea otters were listed, the Fish and Wildlife Service was given an additional year to make a determination about critical habitat. Sakashita said when it appeared the agency was doing nothing to meet the Aug. 9, 2006, deadline, the Center for Biological Diversity filed the lawsuit.

“Habitat protection for the sea otter is critically important,” Sakashita said. “We were concerned because there are new plans for opening up the Bering Sea to oil and gas development...Otters are particularly vulnerable to oil spills.”

Once critical habitat is designated, all federal agencies would be required to ensure that any activities would

not be harmful to the recovery of sea otters in the area.

In January, the Bush administration lifted a presidential ban on oil and gas drilling in Bristol Bay. The area had been under congressional protection since 1990, one year after the Exxon Valdez oil tanker spilled nearly 11 million gallons of crude in Prince William Sound. The sound’s sea otters are not part of the western population.

More than 1,000 sea otter carcasses were found after the Exxon Valdez spill.

The Interior Department has said it plans to make Bristol Bay leases available in 2010 and 2012, pending environmental reviews.

The Aleutian Island sea otters are among Alaska’s western population, which extends from Cook Inlet near Anchorage to the end of the 1,000-

mile long Aleutian Island chain in the Bering Sea.

The Fish and Wildlife Service last did a full count of western Alaska sea otters in 2002. The agency determined that the population of sea otters had declined by more than half in two decades.

Bruce Woods, a spokesman in the agency’s Anchorage office, said declines have continued at some sites.

“The total is probably smaller,” he said.