



ENDANGERED SPECIES: Lawsuit seeks critical habitat for Alaskan sea otters

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The Center for Biological Diversity this week sued the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Fish and Wildlife Service, seeking federal designation of critical habitat for northern sea otters in the Aleutian Islands and southwest

Alaska. The group has been pressing for special protections for otters since 2000 [Center for Biological Diversity v. Kempthorne, et al., U.S. District Court, District of Columbia; No. 06-2151].



The northern sea otter population in Alaska has been drastically cut in recent decades, and environmentalists say plans for oil drilling could make matters much worse. Photo courtesy of NOAA.

Following what the CBD called “two lawsuits and five years later,” FWS last year designated the Alaskan otters “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act, after the population declined by up to 90 percent in some areas.

“Those protections, however, remain incomplete,” according to CBD attorney Miyoko Sakashita. “Once again we are forced to ask the courts to require the Bush administration officials to comply with the law,” she said.

In the suit, the group states, “The Alaskan sea otter is on a trajectory toward extinction as its population collapses.” It cited a study that estimates the popation has declined by 95 percent since the 1960s, with much of that loss occuring since the 1980s. In the eastern Aleutian Islands, the suit contends, otters are declining at a rate of 15 percent per year; the loss is 12.5 percent per year on the southern islands and by 29 percent in the west and central islands.

The group claims that the otter population could decline further if proposals to open areas of the Bering Sea to offshore oil development and allow proposed drilling in Bristol Bay go forward. Otters are considered especially vulnerable to oil spills, because they rely on their fur as insulation.

The Endangered Species Act requires wildlife officials to designate critical habitat. The Bush administration contends critical habitat designations do little good for species and rarely designates them except under court order.

Reporter Allison Freeman Winter contributed to this story.