

## Protect sea turtles: 3 groups intend to sue feds

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla.—Three environmental groups said Thursday they intend to sue the federal government over claims it violated the Endangered Species Act by failing to meet a deadline to complete reviews of rare sea turtles.

The Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity, Washington, D.C.-based Oceana and the Turtle Island Restoration Network in the San Francisco Bay area claim the National Marine Fisheries Service did not meet a 12-month deadline to complete the research after receiving petitions in 2007 seeking reviews of loggerhead and leatherback sea turtles.

The groups, which want greater federal protections for the turtles, said they filed 60-day notices of intent to sue Thursday.

"Sea turtles in all U.S. waters are at risk of extinction and the agency responsible for their protection is failing to do its job," said David Allison of the ocean advocacy group Oceana.

The fisheries service, a branch of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, says that within 90 days of receiving the petitions, the agency found that a full review of the sea turtles was warranted.

The service said it is now reviewing the entire global population of loggerheads and hopes to complete the research within a few months.

"It's a complex issue," said Barbara Schroeder, the service's national sea turtle coordinator. She acknowledged the agency is behind schedule but said more work must be done.

The three environmental groups want the government to increase protections for loggerheads by changing their status from threatened to endangered. They also are calling for enhanced protections of loggerhead marine habitats and nesting sites, most located along Florida's beaches, where it is believed up 90 percent of the world's population nests.

The groups say loggerhead populations have dropped by at least 80 percent in the North Pacific off the United States' West Coast. They say Florida's beaches have seen a drop in nest numbers by more than 40 percent over the past decade.

The turtles, which weigh up to 300 pounds, face threats from boat collisions, fishing trawlers and net entanglements. The species has been listed as threatened, a less-critical classification than endangered, since 1978.

Schroeder said once the review of the global population is complete, the agency will consider whether changing its classification is warranted.

Another petition seeks greater federal protections along key migratory routes of endangered leatherback turtles off California and Oregon. Leatherbacks travel more than 6,000 miles from beaches in Indonesia to feed on jellyfish there.

Schroeder said a 90-day review after that petition also found additional research was warranted.

"Again, these are complex questions, and we want to do it right," she said. "It may be taking us a little longer but we're really taking this question seriously."

She said the agency is studying whether it should designate critical habitat for turtles in the region. Currently, Schroeder said, the only critical habitat for sea turtles in the U.S. is along portions of coast in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Critical habitat designation adds a layer of protection for species by, among other things, forcing an environmental review of a designated area before fishing permits are issued or beach nourishment projects begin.