



## **Feds deny protection for spotted seals near Alaska**

By DAN JOLING (AP) – 10/15/09

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Spotted seals off Alaska's coast do not merit endangered species protection despite losses of Arctic sea ice from global warming, a federal agency announced Thursday.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, however, will list as threatened a small population of spotted seals that live off the coasts of Russia and China.

Doug Mecum, acting administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service Alaska region, said spotted seals in two populations closest to Alaska exceed 200,000 animals.

"We do not predict the expected fluctuations in sea ice will affect them enough to warrant listing at this time," Mecum said in a prepared statement.

The decision followed an 18-month status review.

A spokesman for the Center for Biological Diversity said the decision was disappointing but not surprising. NOAA in December rejected listing ribbon seals, which use sea ice for reproduction and molting.

"We were hoping that NOAA under the Obama administration would actually adopt the precautionary principle that's built into the Endangered Species Act," said attorney Brendan Cummings. "But unfortunately, when it comes to Arctic policy, they're largely indistinguishable from the Bush administration."

Spotted seals use spring sea ice for breeding, often choosing small floes near the sea ice edge that are separated from adjacent floes by slush or water.

Sea ice provides a dry platform during the lactation period and a resting area for pups when they learn to swim and feed. In summer, spotted seals can be found in open ocean or on shore.

The agency said spotted seals have three distinct populations. About 100,000 live near the eastern Bering Sea in U.S. waters and in the Gulf of Anadyr in Russia.

A second group of roughly 100,000 seals has breeding populations in both the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk.

The southernmost population of about 3,300 seals is centered in Liaodong Bay, China and Peter the Great Bay, Russia.

The agency acknowledged that climate change may alter habitat for all three populations. However, it concluded that spotted seals in the larger populations may move north in search of suitable habitat when ice is reduced. Spotted seals also could whelp on land when ice conditions are poor, though breeding sites are limited and may expose seals to increased hunting and predation, according to the agency.

The two northern populations are large, have many offspring and a broad distribution, diminishing their need for protection under the Endangered Species Act, the agency said.

For the small southern population, lower winds and warmer temperatures likely will cause a decline in sea ice that's significant enough to harm the population, the agency said.

Cummings said climate projections indicate the spotted seal will lose 40 percent of its winter sea ice habitat in the Bering and Okhotsk seas off Alaska and Russia by 2050.

"I don't think you can pay attention to what's going on in the Arctic and say with a straight face that over the coming century, an ice-dependent seal has nothing to worry about," Cummings said. "Yet that's what NOAA is doing today."

His group has petitioned to list two other ice-dependent seals, bearded and ringed seals. In a court settlement, NOAA agreed to decide by Nov. 1, 2010, whether they should be listed.

On the Net:

- Alaska ice seals: <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seals/ice.htm>
- Center for Biological Diversity: <http://www.biologicaldiversity.org>

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