

## **ENDANGERED SPECIES: Enviro groups decry U.S. refusal to list Alaska's spotted seals (Greenwire, 10/16/2009)**

**Patrick Reis, E&E reporter**

The Obama administration rejected a proposed endangered species listing today for Alaska's spotted seals, saying the animals would adapt to climate change.

Environmentalists, who had petitioned for the listing by citing threats to the seal from Arctic oil and gas development and melting sea ice, expressed outrage over the decision.

"The Arctic is experiencing a rapid meltdown, and yet the Obama administration refuses to acknowledge that sea ice loss is jeopardizing the spotted seal in U.S. waters," said Shaye Wolf, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

In rejecting the petition, the National Marine Fisheries Service acknowledged that spotted seals' sea ice habitat is declining but predicted the animals would migrate to suitable sites or adapt to their changing environment.

Additionally, the large size of the U.S. spotted-seal population -- which the agency estimates is larger than 200,000 animals -- and its broad geographic dispersal mean declining sea ice is unlikely to drive it to extinction, said Doug Mecum, acting administrator for the service's Alaska region.

Seals use the ice as breeding grounds and cover from polar bears and other predators.

The agency did propose protecting seals in Russia and China as a threatened species, a move that puts certain restrictions on the importation of spotted seals or products made from them. The service estimates that 3,300 spotted seals live off the coast of China and Russia.

"It is tragic that the administration has denied the spotted seal needed protections in our own waters, where we can provide most help," Wolf said.

The administration is still deciding how to handle a plan hatched at the end of the George W. Bush administration for expanding offshore drilling in Alaska.

Protecting the seal under the Endangered Species Act could trigger habitat protections that put additional regulations on offshore energy development, which environmentalists say would expose seals to risks of massive oil spills and decrease their habitat.

The administration's decision on spotted seals was another disappointment for environmentalists, who had hoped Obama would overturn a Bush rule prohibiting endangered species protections from being used to mandate greenhouse gas regulation. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar in May announced that the Bush rule would remain in place ([Greenwire](#), May 8).

"While the rhetoric may be better, when it comes to actual action in protecting endangered species, the Obama administration is indistinguishable from Bush," Wolf said. "Sound science and the protection of the environment still take a back seat to political expediency."